烙印の紋章 V
そして竜は荒野に降り立つ
杉原智則
イラスト●3
電撃文庫

メフィウスより西方、
荒々しい気質をもつゼルド人が住まうタウラン地域。
そこではいくつもの都市国家が乱立し、
長きにわたり紛争に明け暮れていた。
その舞台に新たに現れた二人の人物。
片や魔道士ガルダ。
その率いる軍勢は各地を席巻する。
片や傭兵オルバ。
メフィウス皇太子より身をやつした流浪の身。
いま、両者の運命の糸が絡まりはじめる――。
烙印の紋章V

杉原智則
イラスト●3
烙印の紋章Ⅴ
そして竜は荒野に降り立つ

オルバ
メフィウス皇太子ギルの影武者だったが、
タウーリアで一介の傭兵となった。
タウランには、王がいない

最初から死ぬつもりで戦場を求めてきたか？
マリレーヌ
ヘリオ王妃。
前王エラーゴンの妻だったが、
内乱の末に即位したジャラーに再嫁した。

おれは戦いにしか向かぬ男だ。
平和な時代には何の役にも立たないが、
いざ戦いとなると、なるほど、
どの国の将軍にも劣らぬ働きを見せよう。
グレイガン
傭兵団『赤い鷹』の首領。傲岸不遜な性質。
ヘリオで我が物顔に振る舞っている。

ガルダを騙るペテン師め。
他の王は騙せても、このおれだけは騙されんぞ。
必ずや化けの皮を剥いでやる。
アークス・バズガン
タウーリア領主。
魔道士ガルダの脅威に対抗するべく、
打つ手を模索する。

タウラン地域

デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

Prologue

Hardross Helio lay on his sickbed.

He had never been a physically strong monarch. He was enthroned king of the city-state of Helio at 21, but on that occasion, he had not lifted a longsword one-handed and held it high before the people as was the custom.

And yet, during the more than thirty years that Hardross had sat on the throne, he never once allowed an enemy to breach the high walls of Helio and invade. Prone to collapsing in the heat, prone to catching colds from the wind, still Hardross spurred his frail body on and continued protecting his country and his people.

Then, about ten years ago, he had handed over the family headship to his son, Elargon. However, perhaps because his mind was no longer under tension once released from the exhausting duties of king, Hardross' health became even worse than before. Even though he was no longer king, he was the hero who had run through a violent age of strife in Western Tauran. In their worry over his illness, his loyal retainers had continuously come to visit him in his sickroom. And each time, Hardross would wave his hand and say,

"I am fine. If you have time to come and look at my pallid face, please use it to stay even a second longer by His Majesty Elargon's side to lend him your strength."

The vassals were touched by the words of the former king, in whom the embers of life gently flickered.

And so, having raised their loyalty to the royal family even further, from his sickbed Hardross had contentedly watched their backs as they left.

"With this, I can leave in peace." It was said that Hardross expressed himself thus to the chamberlains who were taking care of him.

However –

Now, Hardross' face as he lay in his sickbed had completely changed from the calm countenance he wore then. He was only in his sixties but in one go, he looked to have aged ten or twenty years, his wrinkles had increased, his hair had fallen out and his body had grown even thinner. His ever gentle voice turned angry and harsh words were quick to gush from his mouth, he would rebuke the chamberlains for even the smallest mistakes and would often have them trembling so violently that they couldn't do their work.

Being eaten away by disease wasn't the only reason for this change. For the past month, Helio had been like a small boat tossed about in a gale. Upheavals arose one after another.

It had all started with an insignificant rumour from the northwest area of Tauran.

A checkpoint had been erected in the mountainous district in order to levy a tax on caravans and travellers. A dispute had arisen between the Zerdians and the mountain people over the revenue from that checkpoint, but had suddenly been brought to an end by the appearance of a certain person. Upon learning that he professed to be a sorcerer who could freely manipulate ether, Hardross lost interest in the rumour, but then two weeks later, the situation took a sudden turn.

Near the gorge that separated the western desert from the steppes was Lakekish, the westernmost city-state of Tauran. Lakekish fell. As there had been neither reports nor messages about a war breaking out, it must surely have fallen at the hands of some concealed, unknown person.

No, from that point onwards, that unknown person – that sorcerer – had certainly claimed a name. "Garda", a name known to every person within Tauran.

After having annexed the strength of the mountain people, the nomads and then of the soldiers from the city he had just snatched, Garda immediately proceeded east. In no time at all, he had destroyed the villages on the outskirts of Lakekish and before the blood on the swords had even dried, he had seized the fortified stone city of Fugrum.

For the first time, all of Tauran truly became aware of the menace. The next to be targeted for invasion by Garda's forces was Eimen, a city-state northwest of Helio. Eimen was where Ax Bazgan's older sister had married a man from the south. It was not in an alliance with Helio. However, it was the nature of the Tauran region to unite against outside threats. Hardross' son, Elargon, decided to send a force of nearly eight hundred soldiers as reinforcements which he would personally lead into battle.

The combined forces of Helio and Eimen numbered two thousand. In the Tauran area where skirmishes were frequent, armies were large. Furthermore, Garda's troops had until then won through surprise attacks. Since this time every preparation was being made in order to intercept them, everyone within Tauran believed that the sorcerer's ambitions would be thwarted.

Before three months had passed, this combined military force was annihilated.

Eimen fell. A few days later, a soldier whose entire body was riddled with arrow wounds staggered back to Helio and, just before his life ran out, cried,

"King Elargon died in battle."

Nobody knew the details of the battle. Hardross had survived for a long time in a world of war, but this was the first time he encountered an enemy like this one. And what tormented Hardross above all, even more than the death of his son, was the strife that death had caused within Helio. The enemies of the royal family were not only on the outside...

"Lord Hardross,"

A chamberlain rushed in as he lay in bed, lost in thought. Seeing his tense expression, Hardross thought for a moment that a host of Garda's forces were finally descending upon Helio, but,

"Lady Marilène wishes to pay you a get-well visit."

The chamberlain gave the name of Helio's queen.

The wrinkles which had been deeply carved in Hardross' forehead this past month squirmed as he twitched. Seeing the former king's expression, the chamberlain asked "Should she be refused?"

"It's fine, let her in." Hardross shook his head.

The door promptly opened and Marilène appeared, lifting the hem of her long dress.

The queen was from the neighbouring state of Cherik. Hardross had often crossed swords with that neighbour situated on the other side of Lake Soma. Twelve years earlier however, repeated negotiations bore fruit and the two countries were bound together in a peace treaty. As proof of the treaty and of the alliance, the king of Cherik's daughter, Marilène, married into Helio. Marilène was fourteen years old at the time. But she was already renowned for her beauty throughout Tauran.

Far from being spoiled, that beauty was at its height now that she had reached maturity. She was dazzlingly adorned with golden necklaces and bracelets. Her sleeveless tunic open at her breast and her transparent silk skirt were so bold that within Tauran, which made a virtue of not exposing skin, she would probably be rebuked for being "immoral" simply for standing there.

Appearing not to notice that the irritation in Hardross' eyes had deepened, the queen lightly curtsied.

"It has been a long time. How are you doing, Father?"

Her voice was as clear as a bell but Hardross glared angrily.

"You are no longer my daughter in any way. You know that and yet you still call me "father"?

Is it so that I will have to correct you myself? Marilène, you have made clear that you no longer share a blood relationship with the rulers of Helio."

In front of her former father-in-law who spoke in gasps, Marilène smiled calmly.

Even though Elargon had died, she was still "queen". What on earth did that mean? If they were to happen to come across the name "Marilène" being whispered on one of Helio's street corners, even a traveller unaware of the circumstances would share the fury of the people of Helio.

"I'm in your way. I whose existence is the last remaining symbol of Helio's royalty am trying your patience, you who covet sole possession here. That's why you've come on pretence of paying me a get-well visit. You've come to measure with your own eyes how long this old man has left to live."

"My lord."

One of the chamberlains hurriedly rushed up as Hardross' face as he lay in bed had turned bright crimson. But the former king shook off the chamberlain's soothingly outstretched hand.

"You vixen!" His voice was loud enough to shake the very air within the room. "A whore who chose to become the wife of a rebel to protect her own social position. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that this was all Cherik's plot. No doubt you'll tell me that everything is going according to plans laid twelve years ago, from when you were married!"

He was so vigorous it looked as though any moment now he would seize the longsword decorating the wall behind him and run the queen through with it.

"I am glad that you seem to be doing well." Marilène didn't move an inch as she smiled. "Please continue to keep up your strength. The people will not forget the power of the Helio family. As long as the father of the nation is in good health, even this predicament that all of Tauran finds itself in need not be feared."

She curtsied once then, having no further business with the old man and, without paying him any further attention, she left the room accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting.

Hardross' head fell with a thud.

"My lord."

He raised his thin hand like a master of ceremonies would. But his eyes glittered with anger and he snorted from overwhelming impatience and frustration.

Within less than a day, the exchange between the former king and the current queen turned into

a rumour and spread throughout the city of Helio. Marilène's infamy grew even more.

But –

"Soma"

What did not become gossip, perhaps because those present did not understand its meaning, was what Hardross suddenly muttered only a few minutes after the queen had left.

"Will lake Soma sparkle again this morning?"

Lake Soma was the halfway point between Helio and Marilène's home country of Cherik. While it could be said to be the symbol of the two countries' history of quarrels, there was probably no one within Helio who would be able to understand what Hardross was feeling or what he was thinking of when he murmured that name.

– There was probably not a single person within Helio who could understand his meaning.

That it concerned none other than Marilène was perhaps Helio's greatest sorrow at that time.

Chapter 1: The Mercenaries of Tauran

Part 1

Kilro was about two hundred kilometres southeast of Mephius' capital, Solon. When he had been informed that the lord of Kilro had been hung by the neck during the slave uprising that had occurred there, Mephius' Emperor Guhl had said in a murmur,

"Perfect."

Kilro had been part of Mephius since long ago but, in truth, three generations ago counting from Guhl, it had been lost to civil war. After that, it had been governed by a powerful local family. Roughly thirty years ago however, when internal divisions arose within that family, one faction requested reinforcements from Mephius. At that time still in his thirties, Guhl had sent the reinforcements. The terms of exchange were that Kilro would become Mephian territory provided that faction was given considerable autonomy and self-governance.

Utterly suppressing the conflict and with Kilro as his base, Guhl had successfully regained control the Vlad Plateau, which contained Seirin Valley – where the betrothal ceremony between Crown Prince Gil and Princess Vileena was held – said to be the sacred place where Mephius had been founded.

Kilro was at the centre of the Domick Flats. The land was rough and by no means fertile, but it was endowed with a large air carrier relay base, a structure which ranked second only to that of Birac, which was the centre for domestic trade. However, as air carrier trade was sluggish, Kilro was currently more strongly focused on being a military base.

No matter how much they got married with the imperial family or swore vows of loyalty, for such an important location to be left to vassals who were not under his direct control was a situation which couldn't fail to irritate the emperor.

Therefore, was this not "Perfect"?

Guhl had immediately organised troops and had dispatched Oubary Bilan to subdue the revolt in Kilro.

And thus not so long ago, Isphan York had been appointed as the new lord of Kilro. He was one of Mephius' twelve generals.

"Or else there is also the rumour that it may have been the emperor himself who incited the rebellion," said Fedom Aulin within one of the castle rooms. After glancing upwards at the other six people present as though seeking their reaction, he continued, "One point of view has it that even the internal disputes that arose within the governing family thirty years ago were originally one of the emperor's schemes. As we can see from his erecting a shrine to the Dragon God faith, Emperor Guhl is obsessed with ancient conventions. He was no doubt willing to do whatever it took to regain Seirin Valley during his own reign."

Fedom paused on purpose at this point,

"Could that be it?"

"Or it might not be."

The reactions of the six were not pleasing to Fedom.

Tsk. They're all getting cold feet. He inwardly stifled his bitterness.

Their expressions were clearly different from what they had been before. When the seven had gathered there in Kilro, they were united in being concerned over the country's future and were a group of heroes willing to rebuild Mephius by force if necessary. Isphan York was one of those that Fedom had won over to the anti-Guhl faction and when he had been appointed as the new lord of Kilro, Fedom had seen it as a good opportunity to gather together there all the members of that faction under the pretence of helping him govern Kilro.

At first, they had had wild discussions during which they let slip their anger towards the Mephian emperor's wilful self-righteousness. Raising their wine cups in the air, they had toasted Mephius' future health before draining their cups empty. As the seven were united in a single purpose – namely their ambition to depose the emperor and install themselves as the country's key figures – they had held passionate debates and that future had not seemed so very far away.

But now.

Even when offered a worthy topic for criticising the emperor over, the six of them didn't bite.

Fedom felt incredibly thirsty. The sun was still high so there was of course no chance of liquor being brought out on the table tops. But what meaning was there in keeping up the appearance of morality at this point? Feeling waspish, Fedom was about to call over an attendant when,

"It's been over two weeks." Indolph spoke suddenly.

He couldn't tell from the general's ever expressionless face whether he meant it had already been two weeks or that it had only been two weeks. But at those words, the mood within the room sank even further and Fedom lost all urge to drink.

Right, two weeks.

Since Crown Prince Gil Mephius had lost his life –

Perhaps because the general mood was so low, the conversation became more energetic than it had been for Fedom's proposed topic.

"Which reminds me, it seems they still haven't fixed a date for Oubary's execution." Said Tesslan, an aristocrat living in Idoro who was serving in a diplomatic position.

"Say what you will, he is a man who assassinated royalty" Answered Nabarl, a somewhat corpulent soldier. "His Majesty the Emperor probably intends to put on a showy execution before the people. It might involve not only Oubary himself, but his entire clan being fed to the dragons."

"Then has the prince's funeral also been delayed because he's waiting for that?"

"I suppose."

Naturally the conversation did nothing to lift the mood. Fedom turned his away from their faces as they carried on their laconic discussion in hushed tones.

Following the prince's death, the emperor's despotism had grown ever stronger. Take Rogue Saian or Odyne Lorgo. For having ignored the emperor's wishes by helping the prince when he was sending reinforcements to Garbera, both generals were being kept away from Solon. Furthermore, even the leading aristocrat Simon Rodloom was still under house arrest on the charge of having remonstrated with the emperor.

Now that they had lost Prince Gil, who was originally intended to be their leader, each of the seven who had gathered because of their anger at the emperor's high-handedness had lost even the shadow of their resolve.

"Speaking of being delayed, what is going to happen with Garbera's princess?" Asked Merlock, a former member of the Imperial Council.

"It seems a delegation from Garbera arrived just the other day," answered Tesslan. "Ostensibly, it's to present condolences for the prince's death, but of course they'll no doubt also be discussing what will happen to Princess Vileena after this. The delegation met

directly with the princess herself, but according to rumours among the palace waiting-maids, she appears to have refused an immediate return to her own country."

"Isn't it that she intends to wait for the prince's funeral?"

"But what about the alliance with Garbera? At present, there are no other suitable young men within the imperial family."

"Garbera's Prince Zeno is unwed. Isn't it possible a new alliance will be forged through a marriage to Princess Ineli?"

"No, it seems that Taúlia has been sounding her out."

"And now it's Taúlia," spat Nabarl.

Although Prince Gil had concluded an alliance with Taúlia, he should have attacked and seized the wide western territories and promptly broken free from the suffocating relationship between the continent's three central countries – so said the advocates of attacking Taúlia.

"But at the moment, the emperor seems rather to be considering drawing closer to Ende."

"Speaking of Princess Ineli," as the conversation almost returned to the emperor, Tesslan hastily changed the topic, "They say there's been something strange about her since she returned from Apta, "

"Ah, I've heard that too."

They said that on the day she returned to Solon, as though unable to suppress her anger at something, she had vented at everything and had screamed at her ladies'-maids and friends alike. And when she had been informed of her step-brother's death, she had exclaimed, "That can't be true."

Visibly shaken, she had done no less than go and negotiate directly with the emperor to "Have them investigate it again". The emperor had always been indulgent towards Ineli but as was to be expected, this time he had raised his voice and had scolded her harshly.

"Well, Ineli-sama was close to Prince Gil and she's at that age, so her feelings were probably thrown into upheaval."

Humph. Fedom stifled a yawn. At one time, said Princess Ineli had made Fedom break out in cold sweat as she had come close to realising Prince Gil's real identity, but now that Gil was no more, Fedom had no interest in conversations about her.

Incidentally, regarding the Grand Duchy of Ende which had come up in the conversation

earlier. Just recently, Prince Eric had intended to march his army into Garbera but, partly because Prince Gil had arrived with reinforcements, he had pulled up camp almost without their crossing swords. It was thought this might cause some friction in relations between Mephius and Ende, but in the end the delegation that had arrived bore only condolences, without expressing any official criticism or dissatisfaction.

According to whispers in the wind, it seemed that Ende's struggle for succession was coming to a head. That being the case, that country probably didn't want to stir up unnecessary trouble with Mephius.

That damn Orba.

Fedom cursed inwardly as he sipped lukewarm tea in place of wine. Of course, only he knew that Crown Prince Gil Mephius had at some point been replaced by the gladiator Orba.

To die in a place like that.

Orba was a man with the devil's own luck. So when he had heard that he had died when Fedom's back was turned, it didn't feel quite real. He also felt that he was being sentimental in being unable to abandon his ambitions.

Fedom too had dreamed too much. His dreams were too big. One by one they had solidified underfoot and now, when at long last they seemed to be within reach, his dreams had disappeared like a mirage before his eyes. The swaggerers who burned with the ambition of dragging Guhl Mephius from his throne were now no different from elderly nobles who had retired from life in Solon. It felt like they were having an insignificant chat over tea, talking about anything and everything.

But I can't grow careless.

Fedom tightly grasped the hand resting on his knee. The seven people here were, so to speak, accomplices. If their plans fell through here, one of them might approach the emperor by denouncing the other six.

With what happened to Simon and Rogue, doubts and opposition towards the emperor are growing. If I can hold my nerve, I should be able to recruit new companions. I can't change course. It's too late now to throw it all away.

Much too late.

Fedom Aulin wiped his sweaty palms on his knees.

He thought he saw Emperor Guhl's figure flicker in the shimmering heat behind the other six.

Part 2

Clouds of dust whirled tempestuously. Tens of dragons galloped over the ground. One dragon-riding warrior was outstandingly fast.

"What, what? You can't win against Tauran's other dragoons like this! Are you fine with letting the soldiers of the suzerain state of Taúlia be laughed at?"

The leading rider who had raised his voice angrily was Ax Bazgan. The governor-general of the city-state of Taúlia let his large body be jogged up and down as he sat astride his favourite Yunion dragon. Several metres behind him, the soldiers were likewise galloping along on Unions. Ax was perfectly aware that compared to the small Tengo, these were not dragons that were easy to handle, but still Yunion dragons were by nature far easier for humans to tame than were the similarly medium-sized Baians.

They were a new species that Ravan Dol had taken great pains to train. Ax felt that if one could not handle them as well as a horse, one could not survive in the turbulent war-torn Tauran region. Above all, Taúlia was facing an imminent threat. Until not so long ago, Ax's bitter enemy had been Mephius in the east. But now –

Oh.

All of a sudden, a shadow appeared in his field of vision. Looking at him from the corner of his eye, he appeared to be a youth of about twenty. He recognised the virile features that could be seen through the visor of his helmet.

"Oh," Ax's thick lips curved into a smile, "so you did it, Raswan."

Raswan was Ax's nephew. As was to be expected, he was skilled. He didn't usually take part in Ax's dragon drills but this one time, he had said, "Uncle, I will be accompanying you today" and had come. And now, without answering Ax's call, he was focussed intently on galloping his dragon.

Hmmm.

The road along the ramparts that Ax always used for his dragon drills had been trampled flat by the dragons' feet. An irrigation canal ran right beside it and wide fields spread outwards. The people doing farm work there rested their hands for a bit as they watched the dragons being exercised.

With a sigh, Ax turned to look over his shoulder.

"But still, they're an undisciplined bunch. Raswan, you go first. They need someone to lead them by the hand."

He said and, slowing his dragon's pace, he let Raswan take the lead. Meanwhile, he went around to the tail end and continued encouraging his men from the rear.

The dragon exercises took nearly another two hours. When Ax called out "Right, stop", the men and dragons were so exhausted that they couldn't move from where they were. Only Raswan Bazgan pretended stoicism and gave Ax a bow as he returned to the front.

As Ax was wiping away his sweat, the strategist Ravan Dol came up to him.

"Thank you for your hard work, my lord."

"Aye. I took my eyes off him for a moment and Raswan has become a fine Tauran warrior." As Ax spoke, he knit his eyebrows as though somewhat displeased. "But, that fellow..."

"Is there something which is worrying you?"

"No, I was just wondering about the way he's looking at me..."

When they had been lined up in a row next to the dragons and when he had bowed and left also, those eyes held some kind of negative emotion when directed towards him. Raswan's eyes, like Ax's, had always been dark. But whereas Ax's were always brimming with a vigorous light, Raswan's eyes were strangely irritating to the person he was staring at, and there was something about that made them feel uneasy.

"No doubt he is dissatisfied because my lord was being considerate of him."

At Ravan's words, Ax's expression grew bitter.

"Nothing less from you, Sir Master Strategist. You're good at reading the inner workings of ordinary men."

"At times such as these, when a youth earnestly throws down a challenge to a competition, the elderly should sympathise with their feelings and confront them head on. Taking the long-term view, whoever loses or wins in this kind of situation is frankly of no importance."

"You say that but the people were watching. And Raswan is a prideful man."

"Although my lord has a discerning eye for others, when it comes to the way you treat them, your knowledge is a little lacking"

"You should show a little more of that knowledge towards me," Ax grimaced. "Once I find a better strategist, I'll pull out that tongue of yours and throw you out of Taúlia."

Leaving the Yunion with a dragon-groom and once Ax had changed his clothes, they went towards Taúlia Castle. Although it was called a castle and had a moat dug around it, its appearance was more that of a manor. While eating a simple meal in the ground-floor hall that faced the courtyard, Ax received various reports from his vassals. Afterwards, he brought Ravan to his own chambers.

"Well then," Ax broached the topic in an offhand sort of tone. "Isn't it about time that Taúlia sent a delegation with condolences over Prince Gil?"

"It is still too early for that." Ravan was a man who always had answers prepared so no matter what kind of question might be thrown at him, he would reply immediately and without faltering. "The letter which arrived from Emperor Guhl Mephius about half a month ago praising the "triumph of both armies" was extremely vague, and nothing has yet been made clear as to a peace conference or an alliance. All the less so since Prince Gil, who promoted negotiations for reconciliation, has passed away. First of all, let us send a letter in my lord's name expressing your determination to carry out the prince's dying wish. You could also attach a proposal to have a stone monument erected at the border between Apta and Taúlia in honour of Lord Gil Mephius who worked towards peace between the two countries."

"Hmm."

"It appears that Mephius has yet to hold a funeral service for Lord Gil. Don't act hastily until then."

"I get it," Ax nodded unreservedly and gave a small sigh. "Damn, so I won't be able to gauge the emperor of Mephius' mood."

Ax knew that now that the threat of Garda's army was imminent, peace with Mephius had to be maintained at all cost. Besides,

There's the war fan.

When he was defeated at Apta, he had the war fan he always carried snatched away by Gil Mephius. It was no ordinary war fan. It contained the sovereign's seal from the ancient magic dynasty. It was the symbol of royal authority from the era of Zer Illias – in other words, the one who held it, and that one alone, could claim the right to rule supreme over this land of Western Tauran.

Gil had said that he would return it at some point to the Bazgan House. But now the prince was dead and the whereabouts of the fan were unknown. Because the loss of the sovereign's seal had been kept secret from most of Taúlia's subjects, they could not openly press Mephius for its return.

Ravan had sent scouts into Mephian territory. Their aim was of course to locate the sovereign's seal but they had yet to produce any satisfactory results. At present, Ax held greater fury against the criminal who had assassinated Gil Mephius than any of Mephius' chief vassals did.

And also,

"Is Esmena still shutting herself up in her room? Should I bring her out even if I have to do so by force?"

Ax's sources of worry were unending. Recently, his daughter hadn't been showing herself in public at all.

"What is it?" Ax asked after a while and gave Ravan a sidelong glare as the strategist hadn't come up with his usual immediate reply. Whether he was plunged in thought or thinking about nothing at all, the old man who looked much like a withered tree had mysterious eyes.

"Indeed, Lady Esmena. Unlike previously, when you were the one to shut her in her room, this time it is she herself who will not take a single step outside."

"Do you not know how to speak without throwing in sarcasm each and every time?"

"The reason is of course because of Lord Gil Mephius," said Ravan, ignoring Ax's rebuke. "Still, Lord Gil Mephius... It's strange."

"Strange in what way?"

"No, it's something I have thought for a while now. I had the scouts I sent to Mephius collect information about the prince and various unnatural points came up."

Mephius' prince was assassinated right after he returned to Apta from having personally led reinforcements to Garbera. The one who had killed him was said to have been a general who harboured a grudge against the prince. "There's nothing unnatural about that."

"What was unnatural were the prince's actions before that. It seems that Lord Gil sent out letters in every direction."

"Letters?"

"I haven't pursued the matter to the end, but among them, some concerned a certain Birac merchant called Zaj. He addressed the Mephian nobles and ministers in charge of commerce and said that he would like them to entrust trade with Western Tauran to Zaj. It would seem that he helped during the struggle at Apta, and as that has now become his final will, it looks like the Crown Prince made preparations for his intentions to be known."

"Zaj..."

It was a name Ax remembered hearing. About a week earlier, a Mephian merchant had been holding a sales promotion on dragonstone ships. Because he went by way of the Northern coastal regions, he wouldn't charge for transportation costs, thus Ax had just given him instructions to procure a warship. That merchant's name had surely been Zaj.

As though guessing that Ax had a dredged up his memory during that pause, Ravan continued,

"Furthermore, there was also a letter in which he applied for the militarily-trained dragons at Apta and their dragon-grooms, not to mention the Yunion dragons sent by our Taúlia, to be incorporated into General Rogue Saian's forces. None of this should have been particularly urgent business, so isn't it exactly as though he was setting up how to deal with the aftermath?"

"The aftermath of what?"

"Of his own death."

Surprise took Ax' breath away.

He stared at Ravan intently. The expression on the old man's face held no indication that he had just said something utterly outrageous.

"You must be joking. Are you saying that Prince Gil had a premonition of his own death?"

"I don't know. Or there is also the possibility that he faked his own death and is still alive somewhere. Sending reinforcements to Garbera was probably not what Emperor Guhl had intended. As Mephius is now, no one knows what might happen for defying the emperor, not even to the crown prince. Perhaps he had already made up his mind when he left for Garbera."

"And so he dealt with various things that would come up in the aftermath? Hmm, it's not impossible... But please don't say anything to Esmena. I don't want her to get her hopes up."

"I understand."

"Well, even if she's at that age, she only met Gil two or three times. Even if talk about marriage to Mephius once came up, what we'll need to do soon is to think about the succession, be it through Bouwen or Raswan."

And with that, the conversation about Gil came to an end. After all, Ax currently had a lot to think about. Mephius in the East and Garda who was approaching ever nearer from the North. Little by little, Garda was drawing towards the southeast while absorbing the soldiers from

the fallen city-states. He couldn't just cross his arms and wait to be invaded.

Taúlia was currently widely recruiting mercenaries and was gathering and strengthening its armaments by buying dragonstone ships and weapons from Mephian merchants and from the countries of the coastal regions.

Moreover, there was the previous fight over Apta fortress. As it was said that Taúlia, whose national strength should have been overwhelmingly inferior, had cornered Mephius and within five minutes had bound it in an alliance in which the two countries were on equal footing, Ax Bazgan's fame had grown ever greater within the Tauran region. Messages poured in incessantly from the other cities. They all spoke in the same voice, asking for an alliance to guard against Garda's army.

However, Cherik's name did not figure amongst them. It was a city-state situated west of Taúlia. At the meeting held recently within the hall, as there had as yet been no messenger from Cherik, Ax crinkled his nose, openly displaying his annoyance.

"They think they're away from the route advancing towards Taúlia but they had better not be planning on watching as simple spectators."

"But it isn't certain that Garda is aiming for Taúlia, right?"

"What he wants is the sovereign's seal." Ax had decreed. "It's clear from the fact that he's assumed the name of a high priest of the Dragon God Faith from the former Zer Tauran. Since he's posing as Garda, he's using empty slogans about the revival of the former Zer Tauran to try to become king of the Tauran region. And for that, what he needs is the sovereign's seal."

Above all else, Ax boasted that he himself was the legitimate king of Zer Tauran. Therefore, he believed that a recently emerged power with a shallow history such as Cherik should immediately rush to Taúlia and bow down as its vassal.

The current king of Cherik, Yamka the Second, was still young at thirty-three years of age. In the previous king's time, Ax had frequently crossed swords with them, but when the era changed to that of the current king, they had concluded peace.

"It's probably because of his youth that he finds it embarrassing to rush here immediately so I'll give him time. But I can't keep waiting for long like this."

Ax spread a map of the surrounding area on the table. He thrust his finger at an area north of Taúlia. Looking at it from Cherik, the city-state of Helio was northeast across Lake Soma. It too was bound in an alliance with Taúlia. It went back more than ten years, to when Mephius had attacked Tauran and they had campaigned together in order to drive them away.

Currently, Helio was first in line of Garda's advance. Since Eimen, into which Ax's older

sister had married, had fallen, looking at its position, it was easy to imagine that it would be the next target for Garda's army. There were three or four cities north of Helio but according to rumour, noble ladies from each of those countries had disappeared one after another. It seemed that just like Esmena, they had for a period of time been afflicted with nightmares. Perhaps because of that and because they were not in the path of Garda's advance, these cities had adopted a wait-and-see attitude. As these were smaller powers who barely managed to survive through trade with the coastal areas, Ax had from the start held no expectations of them.

If Helio fell, Taúlia would surely be next. Naturally notification of a request from Helio to form a united front had arrived more than a month ago. However as at the time Ax was proceeding with preparations for the capture of the Mephian fortress of Apta, the answer had been temporarily put on hold.

And meanwhile, the political situation within Helio grew stormier and stormier. King Elargon died defeated by Garda's army and the city was bathed in blood from the struggle for succession.

We don't need this kind of trend.

As far as Ax was concerned, no matter how powerful the city-state, it was a territory that would one day belong to himself as rightful king. The present situation in which tiny powers, blind to anything but the immediate future, competed against one another was irritating to him.

"So Helio's royal family has also been wiped out? Then the country's name might also be changed soon – at any rate this current king, Jallah, what kind of man is he?"

"He is a man of no ability. He is only good at reading people's expressions. It is simply that good luck befell him as other men of influence better fit to be king brought about their own ruin." Ravan gave his judgement easily but then added something strange, "But it wasn't only Jallah who was lucky."

"Are you talking about Queen Marilène? Apparently he was blinded by her beauty and wanted her for his own wife. Since she was able to protect her position and power as consort, the queen was indeed lucky."

"No, Helio itself. The men who declared their intention of being king of the new era were all hot-blooded military men. If any of them had become king, they would immediately have focused solely on organising their depleted army to confront Garda's forces to avenge King Elargon – and to dispel the stigma of being labelled a traitor and gain the support of the people – and would no doubt have caused their own destruction. Jallah however is more than half aware of the fact that he does not have the capacity to be king. Even now, he has made no move other than gather soldiers and he saves his strength just as our Taúlia is doing. From what I have heard, he has taken in a mercenary leader exiled from Cherik whose force is

nearly seven hundred strong. If reinforcements from our Taúlia were to be added to that, Helio should not fall so easily."

"Ha!" Ax sneered deeply. "Well then, is that also lucky for my Taúlia? Tonight Jallah will be drinking in celebration with the depraved queen. While Hardross who is prostrate with illness will no doubt spend his days unable to even sleep properly because of anger."

Elargon's father, Hardross, was also an acquaintance of Ax's that went back to the time of the war with Mephius, more than ten years ago. Hardross was quite a bit older than Ax but he was a very sensible man.

Ravan had thought so too and had said at the time, "My lord acts haughtily towards everyone. But while King Hardross also occasionally gets angry, he is not loath to deal with my lord’s personality. Even though I am his elder, I feel I should concede his superiority."

"There are also the greetings to Hardross. Should I go over there?", asked Ax. He was by nature impetuous. While the war with Mephius had popularly come to be seen as a victory for Taúlia, in reality it had been severely taunted and knocked about. Moreover, Ax himself had been taken captive at Apta. Those glaring eyes wanted a victory. He had always been hot-blooded and was a lord who enjoyed personally leading the war horses and war dragons into violent struggles.

"No," Ravan shook his thin neck left and right. "Helio will be at war before long. Rumours alone do not give us a complete portrait of our enemy. It is vital to cross blades with them first-hand, so we should first send out the six hundred or so soldiers from the main mercenary force. There will be time enough for my lord to go in person after that."

As he snorted with displeasure, there was something that Ax did not notice and that Ravan deliberately didn't tell him, but in fact Ravan had received information that gave him no choice but to move cautiously.

Part 3

The mercenary commander Duncan was subordinate to the Fifth Army Corps which was led by Bouwen Tedos. He was thirty-four years old. The Taúlians highly valued his skill at unifying the unruly bunch of mercenaries and it was rumoured that he would one day climb to the top and take the position of leader of the corps.

Duncan had cause for annoyance. It was all well and good to have called for mercenaries from far and wide as per Governor-General Ax's wishes, but even though they had already exceeded their full complement, applicants were still lining up outside the barracks. There were people from many different origins. Although naturally Zerdians were the overwhelming majority, even among them there were various kinds of people, from the ones who lived in city-states such as Taúlia to those who still lived as nomads or those who had settled and lived in tiny mountain villages.

But they weren't what was giving him a headache. No, that was a man called Adelber who had already been accepted as a mercenary.

The story had gone around that he was a descendant of the bodyguards who served the savage Geb kings. When he arrived in Taúlia about six months ago, he had made himself known to several commanders.

He was skilful. If anything, his figure was on the slim side, but he handled his longsword lightly and overwhelmed his opponents with his speed. A number of matches were held on the pretext of being selection tests for enrolment, and Adelber had showily defeated even the skilled regular soldiers of Taúlia.

But on investigation, it turned out that he had originally been a bandit leader. His behaviour in town was also bad. He ate and drank without paying, was rough with women and soon targeted soldiers from other countries.

Adelber had sought service with the government forces but because of his past, none of the commanding officers had agreed to take him. With no other choice, he had turned to working as a sort of backstreet bodyguard in the town and so earned a daily income. When Taúlia started recruiting mercenaries on a grand scale, he finally gave up on entering the official forces and applied instead as a mercenary.

Skilled as he was, he was chosen for employ. That group was different from the "well-behaved" regular soldiers. Duncan had bragged about being able to integrate even those with a bad-habit or two into the mercenary corps. Adelber was of course a thief, but he had believed that he would find a way to tame him. Less than five days after recruiting him,

Duncan had begun to regret his decision. On the surface, Adelber never made any kind of mischief. It would have been better if he had, since then Duncan could have punished him or sent him away.

It's influencing morale.

There was something unpleasant about Adelber's features. His eyes that seemed to look down on you and the coarse smile he wore as he gossiped were having an effect on Duncan's spirits. Every night he would call on his fellow mercenaries to go bar-crawling and what Duncan was most afraid of was that the disagreeable atmosphere around Adelber would spread to the other soldiers. For Duncan, Adelber's existence was currently like having a small fishbone stuck in his throat. Once he let himself be bothered by it, his irritation and unease could only grow stronger and stronger.

And just before an important war in which Taúlia's very existence is at stake.

It would be too late once the war had started. He wanted to find a reason to drive him out before then.

Bouwen Tedos had visited the worried Duncan earlier. Surveying the line of those applying to be mercenaries, he had said.

"There seem to be some that we can use. Because what we need are numbers, we've been taking in everyone we could get our hands on but then if we reject all of the current applicants, there's also the chance that we might miss out on some valuable warriors. How about exchanging some of the previous hires for new ones?"

Bouwen Tedos was Archduke Tedos' adopted son and, although young, he was the leader of the Fifth Army Corps. Duncan held him in esteem for his courageous nature and surprisingly effective quick-wittedness. With an "Aye!", he had immediately agreed to the plan.

The next day, Duncan personally interviewed the applicants to choose some of them. Within the queue, he came across a man with an unusual appearance. Among the swordsmen there, his physique was unremarkable but he wore bandages wrapped around his entire face. The only parts that were uncovered were the areas around his eyes, the tip of nose and his mouth. Judging from his skin, he probably wasn't a Zerdian.

"What's with his face?"

"It seems he caught some infectious disease when he was a child."

The one who answered was not the person himself but another man standing in wait behind him. He too was eye-catching. His hair was long and his gestures somewhat effeminate. Though in a different sense from Adelber, he gave Duncan an uncomfortable feeling. In

Tauran, it was considered loathsome for a man to make himself look like a woman or to imitate a woman's gestures, even as part of an artistic performance. The only exceptions were the priestesses of the Dragon God Faith. Even a man could assume that position if he took an oath to live as a woman. Because it was only permitted to holy priestesses, it was rather that it was considered "imprudent" for a man who was not one of them to mimic a woman.

"Ah, but there's no problem anymore. It's just that he keeps it covered because the skin breaks out in sores."

"And the name is?"

When Duncan asked that, the person in question finally opened his mouth. When he heard what he said, Duncan tilted his head to one side.

"I've heard that before. That's the name of the man from Mephius who captured Lord Natokk's forces in a single swoop during the recent battle at Apta."

"That's why we came here," once again the aforementioned feminine-looking man interrupted. "The name 'Orba' causes misunderstandings in Mephius so it's difficult to get by there."

They were a strange pair. Incidentally, they had one other companion but as this was the giant who was towering over the other applicants in the line, Duncan had from the outset decided that he would be one of the replacements candidates. Listening to them, they had been gladiators in Mephius.

Ho. Should gladiators be standing on the same footing as Tauran soldiers?

The man in bandages mostly stayed silent while the man who looked like a woman talked. Duncan also added those two as replacements, partly out of curiosity and partly out of a somewhat unkind wish to see them get thrashed.

Having thus chosen about twenty people, Duncan showed them to the barracks. Facing them were swordsmen that Duncan had also personally chosen from amongst those hired. He had intended to have them fight one-on-one but as the number of candidates exceeded his estimates, they were one person short. Duncan called one of his men.

"Get Talcott," he ordered.

Behind the Fifth Army Corps' barracks was an open space for performing joint dragon-handling drills. The swordsmen lined up to the east and west respectively while Duncan brought out a folding field stool and stayed put to observe the fights and decided who would go and who would stay.

There were no complicated rules. They could compete as they liked with the cloth-covered

training spears or with wooden swords and axes. There were no armour or helmets prepared. This was as good as saying that as these were soldiers hired from outside, nobody would care even if they broke a bone, or received a life-long injury, or even if they lost their life through lack of skill. The Tauran region was a truly violent area.

"That..."

"What!"

Those who had already been chosen and those who would be exerting themselves in order to be chosen would each be thrown into a desperate fight. There was no need to create a life-or-death atmosphere in this situation. Because of the rise of Garda's army, Tauran was an area in which it was becoming more and more difficult to lead an ordinary life. Even though the wages were low, becoming a mercenary of Taúlia meant getting two meals and over three wooden pails of water a day. That was enough to put one's life on the line for.

As Duncan had expected, the giant named Gilliam overwhelmed the already selected swordsman. He had chosen a wooden axe but didn't need to use it as he dodged a horizontal thrust from his opponent's sword then brought a fist like a boulder down on his back. With that, the match was over. Once the swordsman, now frothing at the mouth, had been carried out, the next match began.

Next is that dandy, huh?

Only Duncan's eyes smiled.

That pretentious face would surely turn pale from the violence of the Zerdian way of fighting. But it was too late to regret now. The candidate Duncan had selected to be the dandy's opponent was one whom he had judged would prove comparatively useful.

"Begin!" One of Duncan's men stood between the two swordsmen and swung down his hand. With that, the match started.

"What the -"

Duncan yelped involuntarily. In an instant, the long-haired lady-boy had gotten in close to his opponent and sent his sword flying from his hand. Before Duncan's eyes, it went whirling through the air then pierced the ground. The watching soldiers unconsciously let out a cheer and the dandy bowed affectedly.

Tsk.

Contrary to expectation, he was a usable swordsman and there were no particular objections to hiring him. The selection matches advanced steadily. When only two or three were left,

Talcott, who had been called over, finally arrived.

"Do you need me for something?"

Noticeably raising and lowering his right and left shoulders, he approached bobbing along. He too was not a Zerdian. He claimed that he had been a sailor employed by one of the coastal countries, but Duncan judged that it was ten-to-one he had been a pirate laying waste to those same countries.

When he heard about possibly being replaced, Talcott's expression turned sour. He was a youth of twenty-seven with a smattering of sparse stubble and he tried to completely avoid such a 'distasteful topic'. Suddenly rubbing his chest as though in pain,

"I got hurt during the last training drill. I'll be fine in time for the actual fighting but my recovery will be set back if I overdo it today."

"What was that," Duncan said threateningly, his impressive features making him look like a pirate captain himself.

"I'm giving you an order. Pick a sword and get ready at once."

"I'm strong, Captain. Since it's about hiring and firing, there are more appropriate guys to choose."

To be sure, Talcott was something of a master. His partner hired at the same time as he was, a man called Stan, looked slow-witted but excelled at handling guns. Although the two of them were young, their careers as mercenaries had apparently been long.

Then Talcott's eyes gleamed a slyly.

"Oh, how about Adelber?"

"What?"

"He's been boasting about how he personally beat up some of Taúlia's regular soldiers. Letting it slide might be sowing the seeds of misfortune."

"But that guy can do it. If I order him to take part in the replacement selection and he wins, won't he just get more and more conceited?"

Because the one name that bothered him had been brought up, Duncan started to waver. Talcott closed in on that.

"Pardon me saying so but that man seems to look down on you, Captain. Calling him over here and ordering him to fight without any say in the matter would be a good way to show

your authority as captain. If he complains as much as once, you can go all out with yelling at him. Mercenaries are a moody lot. If just one of them seems to be taking the "Chief" lightly, then there's a risk that they'll make a show of not listening to orders. Frankly, whether Adelber wins or loses doesn’t matter at all."

"Hmmm"

Folding his arms in defeat, Duncan quickly came to a decision and this time ordered his subordinate to call Adelber.

However, there was only one candidate left. The man in bandages.

Damn, when I noticed his skill, I should have allotted the giant to Adelber.

He had no expectation that the man in bandages would win. As a commander of mercenaries for nearly ten years, Duncan was well aware that Adelber's skill was considerable. But Talcott was probably right. More than victory or defeat, the important thing was that he himself was seen to give the order.

The long interval waiting for Adelber to arrive was somewhat unnatural. The man in bandages who was standing around would sometimes look around in irritation. Then,

"Captain. Which unknown nobody is it that you feel like replacing me with?"

Adelber finally arrived. There was a turbulent light in his small eyes. Duncan deliberately pretended not to notice his anger and straightened his back.

"If we're talking about unknown nobodies then it's the same as you."

"Oh, but I think I've thoroughly displayed my skill to the people of Taúlia."

Contempt seeped out of his faint smile. He seemed to silently be complaining that he wanted to be rid of this nuisance, but exactly as though he were dealing with a bratty neighbourhood kid, Duncan flippantly shrugged his shoulders.

"I want to see it again with my own eyes."

"That so."

Adelber spat out a gob of saliva. Duncan had also thought about what to do if he kept complaining further but unexpectedly, he readily accepted the match. No doubt he was very confident of his own skill. But when he was finally standing opposite the man in bandages who called himself Orba, he said,

"Waving around a piece of wood is boring. A real weapon is best if you want to judge

whether a guy is usable in an actual fight."

Duncan was disconcerted and glanced briefly at Orba, who nodded with an air of saying *No problem.*

In the end, each held a Taúlian longsword. The sun was getting higher and higher.

Wearing his usual scornful smile, Adelber faced Orba.

Slightly apart from there, Talcott dropped down and assumed the air of a spectator.

He loathed Adelber. From the time he had met him, he had lorded it over others and spoke in a tone of command, exactly as though they were his underlings or something. There were some among the mercenaries who loved the skilled Adelber with his grandiose manners like they would a leader and who jaunted around with him daily, but from the bottom of his heart, Talcott refused to breathe the same air as that kind of man.

For that reason, he hoped to see Adelber kick the bucket during this replacement selection test or receive a serious injury, but,

Honestly, isn't there anyone stronger left?

The man he was facing was definitely unreliable. More than that, his build was like a boy's. Of course, it looked like he had been well trained but he couldn't possibly compare with the veteran Adelber.

"Well, since it's that bastard if he just gets into a close-run fight, Adelber's stock will fall."

"So this is where you were, Brother."

The one who called out to him was Stan, the friend Talcott treated like a younger brother. He was short and the only thing outstanding about his appearance was his width.

"What's going on?"

"Mephius' famous gladiators. Want to bet tonight's meal on the man in bandages?"

"I don't have a good feeling about Adelber's opponent."

"Whaaat, that guy's a really famous mercenary. Because a great many powers are after his life, he's hiding his identity like that."

"Oh, I see. I get it."

Stan was by nature docile – or rather, simple. Talcott mentally stuck his tongue out. With that, there would at least be some bright spot even if Adelber won easily.

"Begin!"

The match kicked off as Duncan spoke. Without losing a second, Adelber attacked fiercely. One thrust, two thrusts, his violent attacks fell towards Orba.

Orba was fighting defensively. While moving to the right or to the left, he would sometimes bend at the knee and stop a blow, and sometimes take a small leap backwards and dodge a jab. He had no control over the flow of the fight. Adelber's eyes gleamed with cruelty.

"Brother, where are you going?"

"I'm not so rotten a human being that I can watch without batting an eyelid while that greenhorn's neck gets sliced through."

"But the match looks like it'll be over soon."

"And that's what I don't want to watch so – "

As Talcott started to speak, noise suddenly erupted from the training ground.

Reflexively turning around, the mercenaries saw Adelber go in for the finishing blow, only for his sword to pass straight over Orba's head. Having suddenly gotten in close to his opponent, he brought the pommel of his sword against Adelber's nose.

Blood spurting copiously, Adelber fell back. His legs twitched convulsively but there was no sign of his getting back up.

"M-Match over!" Duncan yelled, surprise and joy half mingled in his voice.

"Oi," Talcott unconsciously grabbed Stan by the shoulders and shook him. "That guy's amazing! He knocked Adelber flat!"

"Brother, I won the bet."

"Oi, you did it!"

Ignoring Stan's words, Talcott waved and grinned at Orba who had passed the test.

"I believed in you from the start. And it was me who said to Captain Duncan that you looked like a usable guy and to put you in this test. So hey, treat me tonight. This your first time in Taúlia? Then I know a good place and can take you..."

Talcott's voice petered out and died. Deliberately ignoring him, Orba rapidly walked away under Talcott's very eyes. Even more striking was that he didn't spare him a single glance. Talcott saw red,

"T-That bastard, who does he think he is?"

"That's bad, Brother. Don't pick a fight in front of Mr. Duncan." Seeing that Talcott looked about to chase after him, Stan grabbed his arms and pinned them behind his back. "More than that, I get it. I'll treat you tonight, Brother."

Dammit. Resisting the urge to hurl insults at him, Talcott glared at Orba's retreating figure. *Just when I was thinking that fool Adelber was gone, the bastard who's come in his place is even worse*.

Chapter 2: Phantom

Part 1

"It seems you'll have trouble with women."

It was said so suddenly that Orba nearly spat out the mouthful of soup he had just taken. They were within the dining hall of the Fifth Army Corps barracks. The one who had called out to him with a tray in hand was Stan, a man who was shorter than Orba and who was eye-catching because of his width.

He was originally from the coastal countries but various things had apparently happened and the story was that from childhood onwards he had grown up amongst the Zerdian nomads. About five or six years ago, Talcott had been visiting that region and had lured him away to live the life of a mercenary.

"Can you predict that by his looks?" Next to Orba, Shique asked with amusement. "How can you tell when he has bandages wrapped around his face?"

"As for how, it's more about a glint in the eyes or the surrounding atmosphere. The old woman who brought me up was especially good at it but I only found I could do it myself after I'd left the tribe."

Stan’s face had wrinkles that seemed completely out of place as he was around twenty years old. Because of that, when he was quiet, which was usually the case, his appearance gave a sense of dignity, but when he spoke, he was artless and simple.

"And? What kind of women troubles are we talking about?"

"Well, I could tell if I could see more of his face. Right, there are signs that he has some kind of fate with noblewomen. You should be careful even if you get invited to the bedroom; right now, if you spend the night together with either, it won't be a good thing."

"With either?"

"Stan, what are you doing?" Talcott appeared from behind. Also carrying a tray, he punched

Stan in the back. "I told you to get a seat. You don't have time to speak to Mephians."

After he had one-sidedly declared that and given Orba a sidelong glare, the two left.

"Noblewomen, is it?" Sitting besides Shique, Gilliam gave an uninterested smile as he gnawed at a chicken bone. "If I remember right, either in Tydan or Ba Roux you saved a woman who was being attacked by a dragon in the amphitheatre. From what I heard afterwards, that was Mephius' imperial princess."

"That's not all though. I've told you about Orba, right?"

"You'd have to be crazy to believe that drivel."

Gilliam had heard about Orba being Prince Gil's body double. But as he had been away from Solon during the time Orba spent as a body double, the tale seemed impossible to believe. For a start, he knew from gossip that the masked gladiator Orba was active within the Imperial Guards and that he had won the overall victory at the Founding Festival's gladiatorial games.

"Are you saying that he played the parts of both Orba and Gil?"

With that, he refused to listen to anymore. Shique had also half given up.

"If you don't believe it, fine. But don't go telling anyone else."

"I'm not stupid enough to make myself a laughingstock."

It was still early in the evening but Gilliam was drinking wine like it was water. It was three days since they had been hired as mercenaries. With war close at hand, they practised working in files and each one was reviewed as to which weapons and fighting styles they were good with, but even though they were drenched in sweat every day from training, the mercenaries were still wilful.

I came to the wrong place.

It occurred in passing to Orba that having to hide his face was inconvenient. Since he had thrown everything away anyway, he should have gone to a land where the prince of Mephius' face was unknown.

"Orba," said Shique who seemed to have realised his mood. "I know how you feel; this region's climate and features are just too different from Mephius that it's tough in and of itself. Oh well, once we've had our fill of work here, we can always go somewhere else. How about the coastal countries next time? Have you ever seen the sea, Orba?"

"You're sure take things at your ease." He had intended to feign curtness but couldn't help but smile wryly.

The dining hall was filled to the brim with mercenaries of all origins and ages. But Mephians were rare as Taúlia and Mephius had not had diplomatic relations for over a hundred years. If you went back to the time of Zer Tauran when the city-states currently scattered throughout the west had been united under a single flag, then it was close to two hundred years. During that time, there had been innumerable fights. Things were fine since this was a gathering of mercenaries, but if this had been a hall used by regular soldiers, the circumstances for Orba and the others would have somewhat different. Even if Governor-General Ax Bazgan had suddenly decided in favour of reconciliation with Mephius, it was not so easy to break the chains of fights and hatred that had accumulated between both countries over the long years.

"You being you, you must hate not having a plan." His face having now gone red, Gilliam spoke. "You're not particularly interested in the mercenary business, are you? After leaving the Imperial Guards, what were you planning on doing?"

"Well..."

"Well, nothing! From back when we were gladiators, I could never understand what you were thinking. But now it's different from when we were gladiators, we're companions who'll fight shoulder to shoulder. If you were a bit more cooperative..."

"Wah! I never expected to hear something like that coming from you. You're the one who was always getting scolded by Tarkas-dono for causing trouble."

"Shut up!"

While the two were going back and forth, Orba stopped eating and looked up at the dimly-lit ceiling.

How long has it been? He wondered.

Not that much time had passed since he left Mephian soil. Two weeks at most. And yet when he remembered all the things that had happened in Mephius, he felt like they were events from a far off past.

Nobody here other than Shique knew of it and if they were told about it, they would probably be like Gilliam and not believe that Orba, once a boy who had been forced into becoming a gladiator who killed for public entertainment, had by some trick of fate become the body double of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius' Crown Prince Gil Mephius and had fought in this war-torn era.

It happened just after Mephius and the Kingdom of Garbera had made peace at the end of a

ten-year war. Princess Vileena Owell was sent from Garbera as a fiancée to be married into Mephius and Orba, wearing the "mask" of Gil, had in Garbera defeated the great general Ryucown who had risen in revolt and in Mephius had foiled the aristocrat Zaat Quark's planned uprising. Furthermore, when Taúlia had crossed over the border and he had only a small number of soldiers to hand, he had prevented their advance by making use of the expectations held by Noue Salzantes, the resourceful Garberan commander who had tempted Zaat into revolt, and had established an agreement for peace between Taúlia's governor-general Ax Bazgan and Gil.

Where these many-sided activities would end, no one knew. Later, when Garbera and Ende had been on the verge of opening hostilities, Gil had ignored Emperor Guhl's orders and had rushed in reinforcement to Garbera.

Just as Gil Mephius' name seemed about to resound throughout the centre of the continent, the prince had suddenly disappeared from the front stage of history. He was assassinated by one of Mephius' twelve generals, Oubary Bilan.

… Of course since Orba was right here, this wasn't true. It had been made to look that way as revenge against Oubary Bilan for burning down Orba's home village six years earlier.

Six years.

It could be said that Orba had lived only for revenge against Oubary.

When he had lived on the streets by banding together with hoodlums, when he had been degraded to the status of gladiator and had been forced to live next to live next to death, and when he was suddenly made the crown prince's body double because their appearances were exactly alike.

The black blood that flowed within him, the lines of his muscles that had changed beyond recognition in six years, the opponents he had gone through one by one; all had been solely for the sake of destroying Oubary. In a sense – although he himself would never accept it – those six years had shone. Although dark and repulsive, made of the viscous blood he was so drenched in that he could no longer tell if it was his or that of other people, they had shone.

As proof of that, now that he had achieved his revenge against Oubary, he had lost his aim in life.

Even acting as a body double had only been a way to get close to Oubary and thus get his revenge. And so, it was no longer necessary to wear the "mask" of Mephius' crown prince. For the double purpose of throwing Oubary down into the bowels of the earth and of making the prince disappear, Orba had set up Gil Mephius' assassination.

It had been two weeks since then.

Although somehow or another Orba had left with Shique and Gilliam when they had gone west to become mercenaries, as Gilliam said, it wasn't something that he himself had truly wanted.

Now, after so long.

If he became a soldier, who would he have to kill, what would he gain by it? Taking up the sword was troublesome. But Orba didn't know any other way to survive. In this short period of time, Orba had come to realise that he truly couldn't do anything except hold a sword. This was because no other way of living into the future had occurred to him.

Taúlia, or rather the entire region of Tauran, was nearing a crisis because of the troops of a mysterious sorcerer who called himself Garda. That rumour had been going around from since when Orba was the prince's body double. At that time, his existence had been no more than unidentified threat that had appeared in the north, but now the troops would soon be approaching Taúlia.

Am I fascinated because I still want to be a hero? Officially enter into service in Taúlia then go up in the world by accomplishing one feat after another?

Like the dream he had imagined in his childhood of becoming successful through nothing but his sword... Although that was a plan for the future, Orba didn't feel any more cheerful.

"You're a thoroughly strange guy." Said Gilliam.

"What?"

"Even back when we were gladiators, you didn't have such gloomy eyes as now. Or rather, it's now that you look as though you're in despair because your freedom has been snatched away. When you're around, liquor loses its taste. Hurry up and go back to the room, Boy."

"I'll do that."

Just as he had roughly flung those words over his shoulder and was about to get up,

"Were you the one who beat Adelber in a sword fight?"

Bouwen.

As Bouwen Tedos, the commander of the Fifth Army Corps called out to him, his immediate reaction was to want to turn his face away. He had met him when he wore the "mask" of Prince Gil.

"That's him, general."

As Shique and the others were about to respectfully get to their feet, Bouwen stopped them with sign of his hand. Among the six soldiers present there, the only one who was legitimately a "general" was Bouwen. Although young, his bearing gave a feeling of dignity.

"I see. I really can't tell what his face looks like at all. Is what is under those bandages really so awful?"

"I was disfigured in an epidemic when I was child."

"Let me see. Even just a little is fine."

"..."

"What is it?"

Though he asked his question calmly, Bouwen's eyes were as sharp as a hawk's.

Refuse and he'll suspect me of being an enemy spy or something.

Orba felt intuitively. A mercenary who wouldn't show his face was certainly suspicious. As Shique and Gilliam watched silently on, Orba raised his hands to his bandages. As he was untying them,

"Ah, it's fine. My apologies." Bouwen stopped him with an upraised hand. Orba redid the bandage without saying a word. Shique had smeared the bandages with some suspicious medicine he had bought that dyed the skin red. Bouwen seemed to have seen it at a glance.

"Still, you certainly seem a bit frail for the battlefield. You said your name was Orba? You remind me of that Mephian gladiator. It would be spot on if you wore a mask."

After cheerfully adding "I'll treat you," he headed towards the kitchen. Meals here were basically free but if they paid out of their own pocket, they could get larger portions and buy alcohol.

"Hmm, quite a worthy person," Shique chuckled. "Orba, don't you think the impression is different from when you met him as the crown prince?"

"Maybe."

A new figure came racing in. He was an armed soldier who wore the uniform of the castle's Interior Guards. He stopped when he recognised Orba and the others.

"Oh, are you the Mephians who were hired as mercenaries?" He asked and went up to them.

Upon hearing 'Mephians', Gilliam grimaced. As they were former enemies of the Taúlians, had the soldier come here to pick some sort of fight or perhaps because of their past of being worked as slaves? Either way, he didn't want to be labelled as being a Mephian. Standing in, Shique asked,

"Do you need us?"

"No, that's – Ah, General Bouwen."

"What's going on?"

The soldier stood to attention as the general returned with a bottle of wine. And spoke a name that nobody there was expecting,

"N-No. It's Lady Esmena."

"The princess?"

"Yes. When she heard that Mephians had come, the princess said that she absolutely wanted to meet them."

"Wh-Why?"

"I was not given a reason. But, it is unusual for the princess to so actively request that something be done. Furthermore, as Lady Esmena has shut herself in her room these past several days, I wanted if possible to grant her wish."

"Mephius, is it?" For some reason, Bouwen bitterly chewed the edge of his lips. "But are you calling mercenaries before you when that is the only point they have in common?"

"Er?"

"No, it's fine. Well, how about it? Our country's Princess Esmena wants to meet you."

"We are after all but former sword slaves. To meet such an exalted person face-to-face..." Shique was about to refuse when,

"If we're talking about exalted people, didn't we serve as Imperial Guards to Mephius' crown prince?" Gilliam joined in from the side. He judged that this was a valuable opportunity.

I-Idiot!

While Shique glared at him, Bouwen opened his eyes wide.

"What? Imperial Guards?"

"N-No. It was only temporary." Shique covered up without a moment's delay. "We were once taken up by the prince and took part in the battle at Garbera's Zaim Fortress. After being given a reward, we immediately left Mephius, so we couldn't possibly call ourselves Imperial Guards."

Bouwen appeared plunged in thought for a short moment then,

"I get it. Hey, show them the way."

"Yes, Sir." The soldier respectfully obeyed. And so before they knew it, Orba and the others' wishes no longer seemed to matter.

Esmena?

That name flitted through Orba's mind. She was the daughter of Ax Bazgan, the governor-general of Taúlia. Furthermore, she had two or three times met Prince Gil face-to-face.

He should have already let go of his past as Gil. And yet, he felt strangely sentimental.

I knew it, I came to the wrong place.

"Hey, it turned out to be true," Gilliam said in a low voice as they were leaving. "That man's prediction. He said you had a fate involving noblewomen."

Part 2

"Properly speaking," the soldier reminded them at length, "outsiders cannot be brought to the princess' residence without the lord's permission. This is a special case."

Pushing aside a hanging curtain and continuing down a corridor, they arrived at a section that was detached from the main building. There were figures on either side of the path that the mercenaries walked along. But although they certainly noticed Orba's decidedly strange appearance, they didn't obstruct them in any way.

"Princess, I've brought them. The mercenaries who have come from Mephius."

The princess' living room was much simpler than he had expected. When Esmena Bazgan appeared through a door that seemed to lead into her bedroom, a stinging pain stabbed at Orba's chest.

She's grown thinner, was the first thing he thought upon seeing the girl he hadn't met in about a month. Her full cheeks were sunken in, her eyes that should have been sparkling with curiosity were clouded, and her skin had turned paler.

The three of them bowed. On the way there, Shique had tied his hair up high. He had previously performed a sword dance in front of Esmena. As at the time he had worn make-up like in his gladiator days, just by changing his hairstyle, the impression he gave now should be completely different. With that, he would avoid any in-depth scrutiny.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to come here." The girl smiled but somehow seemed to have no energy.

The sunny room was always warm and pleasant, but because of the shutters, that atmosphere had completely disappeared.

"Please make yourselves comfortable. Have you finished your meal? I can have my ladies' maids prepare something."

"Please don't go to any trouble over us." Shique answered first so that Gilliam wouldn't be able to say "Some alcohol".

When the soldier who had guided them added "They seem to have been Imperial Guards to the crown prince," Esmena's expression changed.

"Then you have met His Highness Gil?" She asked enthusiastically.

From that moment, Esmena bombarded the mercenaries with questions. As long as it concerned the crown prince, she was curious about even the most trivial detail. The one who mostly dealt with this was of course Shique. Esmena listened with rapt attention, wearing the expression of a little girl whose mother was telling her one-by-one the heroic tales of Gil Mephius. The one which made an especially deep impression on her was the story of how the prince had saved the sword slaves from execution when they were falsely accused of having instigated the uproar at Seirin Valley,

"Ah, what a kind person..."

"Indeed. As he was a man of few words, misunderstandings occasionally arose around him, but he was a truly benevolent person."

"I know. He did not go about like a great hero with many feats of arms to his name but was a kind person with a somewhat bashful smile. I too received kind words from him."

She was about to nod smilingly when Esmena's expression suddenly clouded over. She lowered her eyes which had been so full of life a moment ago and her shoulders drooped dejectedly. Her long hair hung down on either side of her face and she looked for all the world like a puppet who had lost its strings.

"P-Princess, Princess."

The ladies' maids who took care of her rushed towards her. While she was being held by the shoulders, Esmena wiped her eyes.

"I'm alright. Yes, thank you." As the ladies' maids stepped back, Esmena gave a poor, weak smile. "I was praying to the Dragon Gods all along. That that lord couldn't be dead. Surely he was alive and would appear before me. While I was listening to your stories, I thought it was a somewhat childish wish. No, but I believe it. That that lord has surely hidden himself in order to accomplish great deeds somewhere..."

What had interrupted Esmena's words was that she had heard stifled laughter, completely unsuited to the situation. Startled, Shique and Gilliam turned around. The quiet laughter was coming from Orba who had turned his face downwards. Esmena was taken aback,

"W-What is so funny?"

"Isn't this supposed to be funny? That Prince Gil is alive? He died. At Apta, through a trick of that foolish general, Oubary."

"I-I have heard so. But that lord..."

"No, wasn't that prince equally foolish? Since he wasn't able to see through his vassal's

betrayal? As for his being a great hero, let me humbly say that the princess overestimates him."

"O-Orba,"

Ignoring Shique's whispered words, Orba continued,

"And the prince won't have rescued the slaves because he was kind or anything. Or rather, that's just nonsense. He looked down on slaves and their lives were nothing to him; they were bugs who had happened to land on his arm and because by chance he was in a good mood that day, he brushed them off without crushing them. He just did it on that kind of whim."

"Y-You..."

Gasping for breath, Esmena tried to stand up. But it had been a long time since she had put all her strength into her legs and she became dizzy from standing up too fast. She unconsciously shook off the hands of the ladies' maids who were reaching out to support her,

"Y-You are also one of those whom the prince saved. That you should so disdainfully..."

"I hate him. That man known as Mephius' Crown Prince, Gil Mephius. That sly, secretive sophist never showed anyone his inner heart and thoughts. He always seemed to be carrying some shady secret. Begging your pardon, but what does the princess know about the crown prince? He doesn't deserve a single one of your tears. That kind of man should just be forgotten."

"Y-You... You!"

The ladies' maids were astounded to the core when Esmena grabbed a vase from the table top and threw it with all her strength at Orba.

The vase shattered with a loud crash.

"Princess!"

"Y-You hateful person! Leave, get out of here right now. O-One as insolent as you will no longer be tolerated in Esmena Bazgan's chambers!"

"Princess, Princess. This is bad for your health. Please, please calm yourself. Oh Millie, please call the doctor."

"There is nothing wrong with me! This person is... This. Person is...!"

Esmena's face was flushed so red it was hard to believe that it had been so pale just a moment earlier, and her steel grey eyes that had been blurred with tears now burned in anger.

"Honestly, what a difficult princess. Because you said to tell you about Gil, I spoke honestly..."

"Orba, you stop it too! Alright, this way."

Shique rushed to escape from the room which had suddenly erupted into noise. The guards at the door were standing open-mouthed.

"What is it that made the princess raise her voice like that?"

"Just a little excitement. Right, let's go, Orba. It's past curfew and we'll be getting a good scolding from the Head of Barracks."

After the three Mephians had hurriedly left, Esmena clung to one of her maids and wept loudly. While tightly hugging her shoulders, the ladies' maids exchanged glances,

At last,

At last, she is crying.

During the time Esmena had secluded herself in her room, she had sat alone without crying, nor of course without laughing. Not eating properly, barely moving within the room, she had seemed to become part of the furniture. Since Esmena always lavished her smiles on everyone without discrimination, when its mistress' heart appeared to have died, it felt as though the room itself had lost its liveliness and had been cast under an ominous shadow, and it had been heart-breaking for the ladies' maids who looked after her.

But now, Esmena's feelings had erupted and she was crying like a baby.

As they held her shoulders and rubbed her back, the ladies' maids also let their tears flow.

"You really are an absolute idiot!"

Gilliam gave Orba's shoulders a shove. Walking in front of him, Orba staggered but continued on without turning around.

"If the princess had remembered us favourably and if we'd stood out during the coming campaign, we would've gotten a much better offer than being mere mercenaries. Shique, it was a mistake to invite this guy along as a companion. Cut ties with him right now!"

"Stop screaming complaints, shut up."

"What? Then before cutting ties, how about I cut you through the neck?"

"Now, now. As for the princess remembering us favourably – Gilliam, you were so tense you didn't speak a single word. If you had stayed there any longer you would have suffocated."

"S-Shut up!"

"Orba," Shique called out to Orba from behind in a changed tone of voice. Orba merely turned his head around. "You, to Princess Esmena..."

"What?"

"Ah, no. Nothing."

Orba frowned suspiciously but then immediately turned back around.

While observing the boy's back, Shique wondered about something.

Seeing Princess Esmena's emaciated form, then seeing how she happily lost herself in listening to stories about the prince, of course Orba wouldn't be able to remain indifferent.

Orba might have been superimposing someone's else's image on top of hers, thought Shique.

In Taúlia once the sun went down, the day's heat dissipated surprisingly quickly and although the places were the same as they were at noon, they became unpleasantly chilly. On either side of the street, shops offering food and drink had started to hang up their lights.

Gilliam continued to complain for a long time.

At about the same time, Ax called his various commanding officers for a conference.

The formation of the reinforcements to Helio had finally been confirmed. The one who would be leading them was Bouwen Tedos. The mercenary force attached to the Fifth Army Corps would also be travelling with them.

"Although Helio is preparing to borrow reinforcements from all over, its political situation is unstable," said Ax. Bouwen stood to attention as he received his orders. "It's so brittle that it could collapse all at once if so much as a seam gets torn. Don't make any mistakes in reading the situation, Bouwen. If you need to retreat, retreat. This isn't yet the time to fight to the bitter end."

"Yes, Sir."

It was the first time Bouwen was appointed commander of as many as about six hundred soldiers. His young face was flushed and it seemed that within his breast, the drums of war

were already resounding.

After the commanders had left, Ax's hand reached for his waist then stopped. When he was excited, it was his long-time habit to bang the war fan that hung at his waist against the palm of his hand.

"Now," Ax growled with an expression as ferocious as though the enemy were before his eyes while the strategist Ravan waited within the room. "That damn impostor pretending to be Garda. Even if he can deceive the other kings, he can't deceive me. I'll definitely tear off his mask."

Ravan didn't reply. On the table which had been used for the council of war were letters which had been received from each of the city-states. Requests for reinforcements and calls for a joint struggle – each country was taking steps against Garda's army. But among them, there was still no word from Cherik.

Part 3

It was nine days since Orba had become a mercenary of Taúlia.

The troops under Bouwen's command left through the city's gate. Among them were of the mercenary forces which had been provided by the army with complete sets of armour and weapons.

They travelled along the main road which had been maintained since the time of the former Zer Tauran and advanced straight towards Helio in the northwest. Because in the Tauran region there was no other way of acquiring ether than to buy it from the coastal countries, there were few aviation units. On this occasion, Taúlia had not sent any carriers and though they were bringing along eight airships, these had been disassembled for the march and were transported by medium-sized dragons. It was the same for the cannons.

Marching together, it would take the soldiers four days to reach Helio. When night fell, they unfolded tents and set up camp along the side of the road.

While the soldiers gathered around the open fires and passed the time gambling, Orba silently sat with his back to a tree trunk. Happening to pass by him, Talcott jokingly said,

"Oh, Mr. Bandaged-swordsman-turned-masked-swordsman. You seem confident with a sword but how about this?"

He showed a pack of cards but Orba ignored him again. With a "Tsk", Talcott grimaced and left. Orba didn't have any special loathing for Talcott but he didn't feel like chatting idly with him either.

Incidentally, Orba was currently wearing a mask that he had received from Duncan. The mask concealed him from above his eyes down to his nose. The area around his mouth was wider than the tiger mask that Orba had worn before – or rather, than the cursed magical mask he had been made to wear.

To the side of the road were the ruins of a small fort. It no doubt dated back from the former Zer Tauran and as its interior was still just about divided by ceilings and walls, the officers were using it as their billet. He guessed that it dated back to the former Zer Tauran not because of the building's age, but first and foremost because nowadays it would be impossible to build a castle or a fortress by the side of the main road in the Tauran region.

….. "Oh, why is that?"

Back when he was the Crown Prince of Mephius, he had investigated the matter in depth by having Dinn, his page, show off his considerable erudition. Dinn had proudly lectured him,

"That's because the public roads from the Zer Tauran era have become trade routes with the coastal countries. The Tauran region has little contact with outside countries, so if these were cut off, it would be an issue of life or death."

"Take for example Taúlia, which is the furthest from the coast. If an enemy country blockaded the trade route, it would be at a clear strategic advantage, no?"

"Yes, but they have a common awareness that they were originally a single country. A foreigner might think it strange but even if up until yesterday they had done nothing but fight and wash blood with blood, if an attack came from the outside, they would come together as one to push it back – that is exactly what happened with our Mephius – because even though they quarrel, they have an especially strong sense of being compatriots."

"I see. If cutting off trade starts being used as a valid tactic somewhere, the other city-states would also do the same. And then the whole of the Tauran region would weaken and then starve. Does the tacit agreement about protecting the trade routes also make it easier in case of foreign invasions?"

"That's right."

Orba mentioned something he had read earlier and Dinn, slightly offended at having been robbed of a rare chance to show off his knowledge, had continued,

"But rather than a tacit agreement, you could call it their absolute taboo. It is said that the roads received the blessing of the Dragon Gods who were worshipped during the Zer Tauran era and if you attack a caravan travelling along them or install a blockade, you will simultaneously be attacked by all the other countries. In addition, it is the duty of each country with jurisdiction over the roads to protect caravans from bandits."

Still,

It didn't change the fact that the western Tauran region was fundamentally a world where only the fittest survived. It wasn't rare for a country's royal bloodline to be replaced within one or two generations or even for a thief to become king. How long would those unwritten laws continue to function? A story had it that when Mephius attacked Taúlia ten years ago, Ravan Dol had issued a written appeal and had somehow rallied the other countries even though they had by no means been inclined to do anything.

It had been a long time since the Tauran region had lost its king. It might be that in this land, the laws and authority of the Zer Tauran era had already faded away.

"What are you thinking about?"

When a voice called out to him, he raised his head and near him was the man named Stan. Without asking for Orba's permission, with a "Heigh-ho", he sat down next to him. From this close, his arms and legs looked short but as thick as logs.

"Here," he held out a small bottle towards Orba. He was about to raise his hand to refuse it but, "It's not alcohol," said Stan. "It's honey. It's pretty rare around here. I won yesterday at gambling."

Normally Orba would have ignored him but contrary to his stern appearance, this man named Stan was unusually friendly. Because he didn't push it any further, Orba for no particular reason took the bottle, scooped a finger in the honey and licked it off.

With a grin, Stan did the same. His always thin eyes narrowed even further when he smiled.

"Still, every time I see it, it's a very strange face."

"You can tell even though I'm wearing a mask?"

"In my case, it shows me a "colour". Hmm, I can't give you a full explanation but, ah, something like, this person is this colour so they have this personality maybe, this person sometimes looks blue so something bad is definitely going to happen soon, something like that."

"That's just normal intuition, right?" Orba said curtly. Stan was unruffled.

"But it's not something to take lightly. On the battlefield for example, I never go near a man who looks blue. Because that means that something bad is going to happen to him and in a battle, that probably means he's going to die. And in fact there's a very good chance that he won't come back. That's how I've survived on the battlefield. I'm not very skilled, you know."

"You said that you were brought up by nomads?"

Something had changed suddenly in Orba's heart. Since leaving Mephius, it was rare for him to take an interest in anything.

"Does everyone among the Taúlian nomads hold an ability like that?"

"No way," Stan smiled as he licked another fingerful of honey. "They're not different from ordinary people who live in cities."

"What about, say, those who are incredibly good at handling dragons? Those that can calm an angry dragon just by touching it with their hand. They can hear the dragon's "voice" or

something like that."

"What's that?"

"If you don't know, don't worry about it."

At the opposite of Stan whose curiosity had been aroused, Orba turned away, having apparently lost interest. "That's a really specific story. A dragon's "voice", hmm? If it's the people from the Barbarian village, that kind of thing seems possible."

"Barbarian?"

Yes, nodded Stan and continued,

"North of Helio there's Lake Kurán. It's said that there is a legendary village there. And it's said that from ancient times, even further back than the Zer Tauran era, the people there have worshipped the Dragon Gods. Since before humanity, before our ancestors arrived here from space... Basically, the people of that tribe are said to be the original inhabitants of this planet."

"There's also that theory that the Ryuujin tribe is the degenerated form of the Dragon Gods."

"Oh? I'll leave that kind of complicated discussion to scholars but in any case, those original inhabitants lost the war with humanity and disappeared, but it seems that they settled down in that Barbarian village."

"There are many adventurers and explorers wandering around looking for survivors of the Ryuujin Tribe. So there should be plenty of people who have come to hear about that legend. It's hard to believe that it's never been found up until now."

"That's the thing. The Zerdians hardly ever go near Lake Kurán. Tales from the Zer Tauran era say that it's the land of the Dragon Gods. So you could say that it's a sacred place for the Zerdians. A long, long time ago, a general – or was it a king? – aiming for the east-side of the Tauran region thought that it was convenient since no Zerdian would approach it and built a fortress there and controlled the entire area around the lake. Apparently, he was going to make it his advance base for capturing Tauran. But before long, that fortress disappeared as though it had been a dream. It wasn't burned down or attacked by surprise either, it truly just vanished without a trace."

"Oh?"

"Garda," Stan paused for a moment, "I don't know if it the same person as the one we're going to fight but the Garda I'm talking about was a priest of the Dragon Gods faith at the time of Zer Tauran. It's said that once a year, that Garda would perform a consecration at the temple

of Zer Illias, well, you could call it a special sacrifice, during which he selected about a hundred people and sank them into the lake."

Orba was by no means superstitious but for some reason the wind that gently brushed against his skin felt unsettling.

"That reminds me, it's just a legend but I have a feeling there were beings known as Dragon Priestesses among the Barbarians. But I don't know if they're the same as the people who can hear a dragon's "voice" that you were talking about."

"I see."

After that, Stan talked about how a river that took its source in Lake Kurán had become the water of life for the people of Helio. For them as Zerdians, receiving that blessing from the sacred land of Kurán was a form of pride. While listening to the various legends, Orba glanced around his surroundings.

The swords and spears which had been left all over, leaning against rocks or on the ground, gave off a pale metallic light by the flames of the fires. There was the incessant sound of words spoken in the strong western accent. The slightly bestial smell characteristic of when men were gathered together reminded Orba of his days as a gladiator. Then, Talcott's voice could be heard in what sounded like a scream,

"Uh-oh," Stan stood up. "You're being made a sucker of again, Brother. He's got a good head but he is a bit quick-tempered. I'll be off."

Once Stan had left, Orba pulled the blanket he had been rationed with around his shoulders and settled down to sleep. The feel of his mask against the ground was incredibly depressing.

When he closed his eyes, Esmena Bazgan's haggard smile floated across the darkness behind his eyelids. It promptly overlapped with someone else's and Orba was unable to calm his feelings.

I should go somewhere further away, he thought.

To a land where no one knew of Orba or knew the crown prince's face, and where he knew no one. A land where the names of the people he knew, of the countries he knew, would never reach his ears.

The troops travelled north along the Belgana Summits. The plains spreading east of the Belganas were dotted with villages belonging to no country and were also a neutral area and a border with Mephius. A fort was built in the peaks and kept a lookout on east and south, defending the border from anyone who tried to break through the mountains.

As the peaks gradually grew lower, Helio's outer walls came into sight. A column of ornately decorated riders awaited them before the gate. Bouwen sent a messenger on horseback and permission was soon granted for all of Taúlia's accompanying troops to enter into Helio.

The people lining the streets cheered with joy as the reinforcements arrived.

"So Ax, have you finally lifted your heavy backside?"

Said a person watching the scene from the top of a tower. The tall, lean figure smoothed back his hair and arranged his moustache. At first glance, he looked like a fop, but his entire body radiated the energy of a beast in the field. Unusually for the west, he lightly wore formal clothes over the armour that completely covered his limbs.

"That's a pretty good size too. Did you panic upon realising that if this place fell, you were next? Well never mind, we'll give you the heartiest of receptions."

Although he spoke as haughtily as the king, he was not originally from Helio. His name was Greygun and he was a mercenary commander from the allied country of Cherik. After running rampant through the battlefield, killing enemies and raping women, he would subjugate allied villages by force if necessary and wilfully set up base there. Such was the fame of Greygun, leader of the "Red Hawks" mercenary band.

However, his excesses having crossed the line, he had quarrelled with King Yamka II and been banished from Cherik. On that occasion, he had taken away not only his own band but also a great many soldiers from Cherik's regular army, so that all told, he had left the country accompanied by over seven hundred soldiers.

Naturally with that many soldiers to feed, there was a need to immediately be hired by some other country. Luckily for him, the entire Tauran region was in the middle of an invasion by Garda's forces and countries everywhere wanted strong military units. Thus Greygun came here, to Helio.

With the total annihilation of the reinforcements sent to Eimen followed by a civil war, Helio had very few regular soldiers left and Jallah, who had only just become king, unhesitatingly welcomed Greygun's forces and promised them high rewards.

From then on, Greygun had all but taken on the entire managing of military affairs. His men's behaviour also seemed to say that this town was already theirs.

It was said of Greygun that he was originally an orphan born from the womb of a prostitute who had been worn to the bone on the battlefields. When he drank, he always said, in a tone that mingled conceit and self-mockery at his own birth,

"I'm a man who was born on a battlefield and who will die on a battlefield."

Such was the man who, while looking down on Taúlia's marching troops from a tower window, asked the man who was waiting behind him,

"When do you judge that Garda's forces will act?"

Like the desert people, this man wore a cloth over his head that was fixed in place by a ring. Though his features were finely chiselled, he was as thin as though wasted away by disease.

"We will act in a week's time." His rough voice resembled the menacing noise of a desert snake on the prowl.

"Indeed?" Greygun spat on one of his fingers then used it to smooth his moustache. "Those damn Taúlians still put on airs as the rightful descendants of Zer Tauran, but will their mouldy old pride be of any use to them in battle? I'll be sure to watch on."

Chapter 3: Helio

Part 1

While on the march, Orba heard various rumours about Helio. Unlike when he was Crown Prince, Orba didn't actively seek out information but the soldiers' conversation spontaneously reached his ears.

King Elargon of Helio had led reinforcements to Eimen in the north but had died in battle a month ago.

Then, as soon as that information reached them, the senior vassals had unexpectedly mobilised their soldiers. To avenge their king and bravely confront Garda's army – was not the reason. They arrested those who were of royal lineage and rose in revolt, attempting to become king themselves. Prostrate with grief at the death of his son, Hardross had been negligent and was captured from the very first.

Without waiting for the foreign enemy to arrive, Helio's royal court was bathed in blood. Those who opposed the rebellion, those who followed the spirit of the age and took part in the rebellion – the chief vassals were torn apart by strife and many talented people were lost.

Then amidst this upheaval, Elargon's orphan, Rogier, disappeared. Rogier was not Queen Marilène's child as she had not been able to produce one, but was a child born to the king and his concubine Teeta. He was nine years old.

When the foolish, gruesome struggle came to an end, the one who had won sovereignty over Helio was a man named Jallah. He had held the position of Deputy Director of Financial Affairs, but he was a man who left such a weak impression that upon hearing his name, the populace couldn't immediately call his face to mind.

Jallah had been on the side of the uprising but when the former chief vassal who led the rebellion had been about to finally grasp the throne, he had suddenly betrayed him and taken his head. After the leading figures came crashing down, Jallah had reaped the benefits with almost no effort on his part.

"Marilène seems to be the one pulling the strings in the background."

The soldiers gossiped. Not only the affair with Jallah but even the rebellion itself might be part of a strategy that Marilène had drawn up. And then Marilène, who should have been in mourning for her husband, readily chose to become the wife of a rebel who had betrayed Helio's royal family.

"That woman married into it from Cherik. The king of Cherik is Marilène's older brother. She deliberately placed on the throne a man like Jallah that she can manipulate like a puppet."

Furthermore, it was even rumoured that Marilène might have assassinated Elargon's orphan son Rogier as well as the child's mother, the concubine Teeta whose whereabouts were also unknown.

And so they speculated about the dark connection between Marilène and her homeland but however, now that danger was closing in on Helio, no reinforcements had been sent from Cherik. There were various theories but, "It's because of Greygun," was the prevailing opinion.

He had been the commander of Cherik's mercenary force but had incurred King Yamka II's displeasure and had been driven out of the city-state. Jallah had then hired the man at vast expense. It was said that because of that, the enraged Yamka had suspended reinforcements to Helio.

A succession of strategies and betrayals, huh?

Even while believing that this had nothing to do with him since he had chosen to become a mercenary, Orba couldn't help thinking about it as he passed through the gate and observed the faces of the people who were lining the streets.

The victims were always the powerless populace. A boy was gazing towards Orba as he marched by. His thin body was clad in shabby and somewhat dirty clothes. But there was hope and yearning in his eyes as he watched the soldiers. Orba quickly turned his eyes away. He was exactly like he himself had once been.

Compared to Taúlia, Helio was surprisingly dusty. The roads were not maintained and plain stone houses were lined up on either side of the streets. Stalls and food carts stood out on the street corners.

Orba, Shique and Gilliam were walking along at the time just before sunset.

They were people who had come in reinforcement to another province. Regular soldiers of course but also mercenaries had a tight military discipline imposed upon them. They weren't even allowed to drink, since it might cause a diplomatic incident if the people or military forces of another country provoked a quarrel.

However, the commanding officer of the platoon the three of them had been incorporated into was a half-hearted man. The mercenary troop had been divided up and although Orba and the others were assigned an unoccupied private house as their quarters, their platoon leader hadn't given them any strict warnings.

"I'll do the roll call before going to bed. Be back before then," was all he had told them. After which, feeling restless, he had been the first to head out.

"But this town sure has nothing."

"Tsk. Listen, Gilliam. Since we attract attention as Mephians, be careful what you say."

Gilliam's bad mood was because although, like the platoon leader, he had been quick to go out, he had been refused entry into a back alley brothel. The store owner had given some plausible excuse or another but, in short, he didn't want to accept a customer from Mephius.

If a rumour sprang up that *They slept with Mephians in that brothel*, Zerdian guests might stop coming.

So when the openly furious Gilliam had returned, Shique had invited him to eat dinner with Orba and him.

As they had no particular destination in mind, they strolled aimlessly along the streets. These were overflowing with various races of people, Zerdians of course, but also the many mercenaries who had originally been employed by this country.

Exactly as Gilliam had commented critically, there was "nothing" flashy that caught the eye. Although other countries insultingly called Mephius plain and solid, it obviously still looked far more colourful than a tiny city-state.

"Above all, there was entertainment. Entertainment in murdering people." Gilliam said with some self-mockery as he looked back on his days as a gladiator.

For his part, Orba barely opened his mouth and simply gazed apathetically at his surroundings, showing no particular interest in anything.

Good grief. Leading is a terrible burden, thought Shique, but he didn't hate taking on that role. After walking aimlessly for about an hour, they entered a shop.

"Oh?"

The reason that Shique called out was that they suddenly caught sight of Talcott and Stan. The two of them were attached to the same platoon as them. Stan greeted them but Talcott deliberately ignored them, being engrossed in something else.

"I've had enough of that brutal mercenary business. When I met you here, I thought I had found a flower that is only for me. A flower that I feel I'll carry away with these hands rather than have it be picked by other guys. Say, when the fighting is over, how about leaving this town with me?"

He was making advances to a girl working at the shop. She was about twenty years old. Her head wrapped in a vivid red scarf, the woman turned her shoulder and dodged Talcott's hand.

"If you say the same thing sober and after having watched me put my make-up on, then I'll believe it."

She answered laughingly although she was wearing very little make-up. In short, she was quite used to this. Shique could well imagine that she broke away from drunkards like this every night and smiled involuntarily.

In the western Tauran region, there were huge differences in the status of women depending on the country. Here in Helio as in Taúlia, they were comparatively free as to their appearances – although there was still the regional characteristic of exposing as little of the skin as possible – and thus could get jobs in the service industry, but for example in Cherik to the west, it was forbidden for women to appear in public and when they went out, they were strictly obliged to envelop not only their bodies but also their faces in cloth so that only their eyes were exposed.

In any case, the woman who had gently chided Talcott went towards Orba and the others and took their orders. Upon seeing Orba's masked appearance her eyes went a little wide in surprise, but she didn't say anything in particular. Gilliam looked around the store. It wasn't very large and could only take five tables side-by-side, but there didn't appear to be any other store employee.

"Do you manage it alone?"

"My little brother is in the kitchen," The young woman answered adroitly. "He shook off my opposition and took part in the fighting in Eimen, and injured his leg. As he is surly even when he comes out, I've left the kitchen to him."

Her appearance was simple and she was not the type to attract looks and be called beautiful, but her expression and voice were bright and cheerful. She was surely very popular in the neighbourhood. In some ways, she was reminiscent of a woman called Mira, the attendant to the Imperial Guards' Infantry Regiment.

There was one other customer. He was also a member of the same mercenary platoon but unlike Talcott and the others, he sat alone. He was even more taciturn than Orba currently was and his voice wasn't heard again after the initial greeting. His name was something like Kurun.

The young woman who had given her name as Kay came in carrying the food. Roasted mutton flavoured abundantly with spices, pumpkin soup and various vegetables.

Gilliam had ordered beer but the store didn't have any. In its place, a liquor made from nuts was brought out. As it was sharp and very bitter, Gilliam pulled a face after just one mouthful.

"Neither the food nor the drinks here have anything going for them."

"Don't say that. Come on Orba, you eat too. Once you get used to it, eating any country's food is all the same."

As they were more than halfway through their meal,

"Oh, we've never been here before."

"Doesn't it look kind of dirty? That's why I said we should've gone to the earlier shop."

With a clatter of footsteps, the men entered noisily. Glancing at the entrance, Kay frowned for a moment.

They were well-built soldiers in plain equipment.

"Red Hawks," Shique muttered in a whisper. On their breastplates was drawn a bright red hawk. The emblem of the mercenaries led by Greygun.

Ever since coming to Helio, they had had considerable power there and so it was said that they behaved as though the town were theirs. They gallivanted around every day thanks to their abundant war funds and wrecked shops where they claimed there was bad service. They extorted money from wealthy merchants on the grounds that they were protecting the town. Those who defied them even a little were hit, kicked and finally dragged to the Red Hawks' barracks.

King Jallah pretended not to see any of this. Greygun's main hold was that Helio was currently a country with no one else to defend it. And so his soldiers grew more and more arrogant, and not a day went by without them causing trouble.

Shique and the others were getting to see that kind of typical behaviour. The soldiers haughtily sat down and ordered food.

"Oh? There are Mephians here," one of them said, intending to be heard. "Oi, how many Zerdians from Taúlia did you kill? And they dare send them into Tauran!"

"Leave it. Or you'll be murdered by that boy in the mask."

Vulgar laughter sounded. Shique held back Gilliam who was about to wordlessly rise from his seat. That he had not been going to leave the shop was obvious from the way the muscles in his arms were bulging.

Kay brought in the food and alcohol. After the soldiers had complained harshly about the seasoning, when Kay had gone up to them to clear away the empty plates,

"Kyaa!"

Forcibly pulling Kay's hand, a soldier held her in his own arms.

"P-Please stop," courageous and firm, Kay did not lose her smile. "If you are looking for that kind of shop, there are any number in the alleys."

"I'm not interested in prostitutes. I'll show you a good time. As a Red Hawk's woman, you'll have as much money as you want. You'll get to wear nice clothes too. It's not a bad deal."

"Boorish louts," Talcott whispered audibly from where he was. "Their way of flirting is just vulgar."

"I have the shop I inherited from my parents, so..."

"Hah, just hurry up and close such a boring, worthless shop..." The one who spoke was a soldier with full cheeks. While two or three of the others roared with laughter, Kay scowled and tried to stand up. At that, the soldier with full cheeks shoved her down.

"Sister!"

A young man had suddenly come flying out of the kitchen. Although it had to be said that he was somewhat lacking in force as he did so since he walked with a cane, dragging his right leg. Kay's brother no doubt.

"What are you doing to my sister? Get out!"

He was slender and still at an age where he could be called a boy, but he approached the soldiers with an impressively threatening look. One of them spread his hands wide.

"Oi, oi. You don't need to threaten us like that. Our bad. We'll leave at once."

As he said that, he kicked the boy in the stomach. As his body pitched forward, this time it was Kay who yelled out "Niels!" as she tried to go to him. Her hair was yanked from behind.

"Sure, we'll leave like you asked. But before we leave this shop, it might be that the shop disappears from in front of us, you know?" He forcefully lifted Kay onto his shoulder.

Tsk, Shique bit his lip. Even after having joined roughneck mercenaries, he still wasn't one to toe the line. But they couldn't kick up a row with the Red Hawks. Just then, he saw Kurun out of the corner of his eye. He had hunched his shoulders as though not wanting to be noticed and it looked like he was thoroughly frightened, except that his expression was furious. He was probably dealing with the same inner conflict – just as Shique was thinking that,

"Ugah!"

A strange groan sounded.

One of the soldiers clutched the side of his face.

It can't be...

Shique didn't need to wonder any further. At the soldier's side stood the figure of a man in a mask. His fist was stretched out in mid-air.

"Ho," Gilliam grinned and rose from his seat. "For once we agree, boy."

"W-Wait!"

Before Shique had time to stop him, Gilliam rushed in.

"These Mephian bastards!"

"Do you know what will happen to you for laying hands on us?"

"And you," Gilliam threatened in place of Orba, who remained silent. "Don't think you can get away after laying hands on a woman!"

"Damn you, try us!"

With seven of them, the Red Hawks were the more numerous. Even though no sword had been drawn, with the pushing and jostling a confused brawl broke out. While Gilliam caught one of them under his arm and tossed him away, Orba suddenly stepped back from the one he had been grappling with and threw a direct kick at his nose. Breaking in at that moment to try and stop things, Shique was punched from the side. For a moment, he watched the blood drip from his nose and stain the floor as though it was somebody else's problem then,

"You bastard," his shaking voice sounded like that of a different man. "You injured *my face*. The face of Shique Aeland, the descendant of an ancient dynasty! "

"Keep yapping!"

He dodged the next fist flung his way by quickly squatting then mercilessly kneed his

opponent in the groin.

In the midst of this commotion, nobody noticed that the mercenary called Kurun had disappeared. As for Talcott who had been sitting further away, he had nimbly jumped on top of his table and was cheering enthusiastically. And thereupon hit Stan with his elbow.

He glanced towards the entrance, his eye caught by something, then with surprising speed started running towards the back door. Stan followed after.

At about exactly the same time that the two vanished from sight,

"What are you doing!"

More soldiers appeared in the doorway. No doubt they had come because they had heard the uproar. Unfortunately for Orba and the others however, they were not part of Helio's regular troops. On each of their armoured breasts, a red hawk proudly spread its wings.

Part 2

Within the castle hall, Bouwen Tedos was having an audience with King Jallah. Beside whom was Queen Marilène.

Bouwen had also heard a great many rumours, but, he reflected, as to whether they were true or not, the only one he could currently confirm was that of her jewel-like beauty.

Cherik's royal family had a close relationship with one of the coastal countries, Libra, and Marilène had also inherited foreign blood. Her skin was as pale as ivory, her hair and eyes as black as jet. Somehow just from her being there, the place seemed almost stiflingly filled with the fragrance of flowers.

As for Jallah, he was a pot-bellied man whose eyes slanted downwards. Not matter how much he dressed up like a king, his appearance was uncomfortably close to that of a nervous middle-aged man who had been forced to perform the king's part in a play.

Be that as it may, Jallah offered the customary greetings.

"Still, hasn't Sir Bazgan's decision come a little late?" Greygun cut in.

No matter how richly he was being paid for his services, a mercenary was a mercenary. Bouwen was a little taken aback by his manner which was like that of a king. And because of his youth, he couldn't hide his surprise.

"I-Isn't it fine, Greygun? Since with this six hundred soldiers have hurried over."

Jallah intervened to smooth things over. Even from an outsider's perspective, it was obvious that he couldn't help breaking out into a cold sweat from being caught in a difficult position between the two.

Seething anger born from surprise welled up within Bouwen's breast.

"Sir Greygun is acting exactly like the country's general." He said, his words mixing exaggerated praise and sarcasm.

Greygun's expression however didn't change in the slightest.

"I am a man fit only for fighting," he boasted. "In times of peace, I'm not good for anything but during a war, indeed, I will show you that I am just as competent as any country's general. As for my having flown from Cherik, with all due respect to him, King Yamka II was showing a

weak attitude towards Garda's army. I judged that I would be able to fight to my heart's content here in Helio and so I came."

His manner seemed easy-going as he fiddled with his beard, but his eyes both overflowed with energy and held the cool glint of beaten steel. As he said himself, he looked like a person who was competent when it came to battles.

"Oh, what a reliable ally we've acquired. And what bad luck for Garda's army that such a great hero exists in Helio."

"My performance will be suitably outstanding." Greygun smiled disdainfully.

Damn cub – That feeling could clearly be seen through his smile. Bouwen was certainly young and was on the verge of flying unthinkingly into a rage.

At that moment, a person rushed in. One of Greygun's subordinates. He kneeled at a distance.

"It's fine," Greygun gave his permission and beckoned him to his side. He didn't appear to care that they were in the presence of the king. "What!" Greygun exclaimed as the man whispered in his ear. Then after an interval, he looked towards Bouwen.

"W-What is it, Greygun?"

Asked King Jallah, unable to bear the tense atmosphere.

"This is quite a problem," Greygun stroked the hair on his chin. "It seems that no sooner had they arrived than Sir Bouwen's soldiers began running amok in town."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm told they were out drinking, drunkenly picked a fight with my men and injured seven of them."

"Nonsense!"

Bouwen growled, but while Greygun truly did seem troubled, it was clear from his expression that he found this development amusing.

"King Jallah, it appears my men have seized the scoundrels and are bringing them nearby. Is it alright if they haul them here?"

Although he asked for the king's decision, it was obvious from the tone of his voice that he knew what the answer would be. His eyes glinted like a naked blade when Jallah weakly nodded "Y-Yes".

Before long, three young men were lead into the hall. In that instant, Bouwen ground his teeth.

Shit!

The ones with their hands tied behind their back were undoubtedly Taúlian mercenaries. He didn't remember the face of each and every one of them, but there was no mistaking the appearance of that masked soldier. Reading Bouwen's expression, Greygun smiled,

"It certainly appears that they are Taúlian soldiers."

Laughter broke out from an unexpected direction. Ringing out as clear as chimes, that voice did not fit the occasion.

"M-Marilène."

While Jallah cringed, the beautiful queen lifted her plump lips into an enchanting smile.

"As seven were said to have been injured, I was wondering how many people there were. Were the brave heroes of the Red Hawks bested by only three people? Taúlia has also gathered powerful warriors here."

"Y-Yes." Bouwen was unable to give any other answer.

Greygun of course did not find the comment amusing. Squaring his shoulders, he approached the three of them.

"Given that he has his face hidden, he might be a spy for the sorcerer. Or he might have used some suspicious art. Anyway, show us your face!"

Greygun smoothly unsheathed the sword at his waist and instantly pressed it against the masked soldier's – against Orba's neck. Orba didn't stir a single muscle. Greygun mockingly slid the sword's blade over the mask.

"Oh ho, you don't beg for your life? It's also said that the sorcerer's puppets have no heart." Still talking nonsense, Greygun swiftly raised the sword over his shoulder. "My Lady Queen, will a puppet die if you slice off its head? Don't you think that would make for a very interesting spectacle? I will show it to you right now."

Marilène kept a faint smile on her face and seemed about to rise to her feet to better see the execution. Shique held his breath and even Gilliam was about to shout out when,

"Wait!"

An old man appeared in the hall. He was clad in a luxurious blue toga but his footsteps were unsteady and a soldier was propping him up on either side. An uneasy tremor passed over

Jallah's face before he smoothed it over with a courteous smile.

"Well, well, Lord Hardross! It is unusual for you to come here. And your health, are you well?"

Hardross Helio, father of Elargon, the previous king. His thin chest heaved up and down. Although he had lost both his position and title as royalty, he still had considerable influence. To the people, the exploits of Helio's royal family and of Hardross himself were unforgettable, and if Jallah wished to reign peacefully, he would have to be careful about how he treated Hardross.

At present, he was in a state of house arrest. He was allowed to move relatively freely within the palace but soldiers under Jallah's command kept a strict watch over him and he couldn't take a single step outside.

"Am I well?"

The old man's voice shook as he spoke. The wrinkles all over his face were like hollows carved by anguish. But his eyes were firm as he glared at both Jallah and Greygun.

"Even if I were not well, such a racket within the Court could not fail to spur an old man into action. Greygun, or whatever you're called, I will not allow more blood to be shed needlessly within Helio's royal court. News of the racket your soldiers raise in town has also reached my ears. There will be no talk of leaving it at having these three shouldering the entire responsibility alone."

Greygun for the time being adopted a respectful posture and sheathed his sword. Focussing his eyes at the last on Marilène, Hardross said,

"Now is not the time for inside quarrels. Any day now a fearsome foreign enemy might destroy the walls of Helio. Our duty is to protect the people. In a situation like this, to raise one's sword because of a town brawl is..."

Having spoken that far, Hardross started coughing violently. Jallah seized the opportunity and clapped his hands to have him expulsed.

"Sir, you should not overdo it. Here! Escort Lord Hardross back to his room."

"Wait, Jallah. There is still..."

Even as he was being almost violently jostled, Hardross started to say something when Marilène gently swept up the long hem of her dress and rose from her seat.

"My lord, please be at ease. I will take responsibility for welcoming these brave heroes from

a foreign country and there will be no more bloodshed in this place. Isn't that right, Greygun?"

"Yes."

As the queen had declared that she was taking Orba and the others as her own guests, Greygun could not interfere. Marilène turned her eyes from the mercenary commander back to her former father-in-law and smiled sweetly.

"There, please return to your room and recuperate. The most important thing that you must do for this country My lord, is to please take care of your health."

"You vixen!"

During another furious coughing fit, Hardross glared rigidly at Marilène. When his figure finally disappeared, the temperature in the hall abruptly seemed to drop by two or three degrees.

Not long after, Greygun also excused himself from Jallah's presence. Running after him, the vice-commander of the mercenaries complained bitterly,

"I didn't think that the queen would interfere."

Greygun snorted and his moustache swayed slightly at the breeze.

"We're talking about that wanton queen. I'd say that tonight for a change, she'll be inviting the likes of mercenaries to her bedroom."

So he said but the look in his eyes was nowhere near as calm as his words and he always took an unusual amount of interest in Marilène. And also,

That masked bastard. Even when I thrust my sword at him, he stared straight back into my eyes.

The look in the eyes of one worthless soldier had left Greygun irritated.

A while later, the commander of the mercenary troop left the vice-commander and returned to the spacious room inside the castle that he had been allocated. There a man with a cloth wound around his head who looked like nomad was waiting for him. Here in Helio, he was always near Greygun. Although their relation was probably that of master and servant, he didn't turn around when Greygun entered and was peering into some kind of crystal ball that he held in his hands. Not seeming to mind, Greygun asked,

"Can you see something interesting?"

The shape of the crystal ball that the man was holding resembled a skull, but one slightly different from a human skull. It had a long snout and on either side of the forehead there was a protuberance resembling a horn. The shape was like something between a human and a dragon. Looking into the sunken eye sockets, the man said,

"The arrangements are complete."

Oh, hummed Greygun. He had forgotten his earlier irritation and his eyes blazed with light.

"At last. I'm tired of being an army commander. That a sorcerer with devilish power should once again hold sway over the world, truly, this era has become much more interesting."

Stroking his dark blue beard, Greygun struck the pommel of his sword as though unable to suppress his excitement.

Part 3

Where Marilène invited the three was naturally not to her bedroom, but to a temple of the Dragon God faith.

Looking up at the high domed roof, now that the sun was sinking the top was swallowed by the shadows and could no longer be seen. After waiting for court ladies to light a number of candlesticks dotted around the temple, Marilène walked along the marble floor then knelt for a moment before the altar to offer a prayer.

"This also fits with that fortune-telling," Gilliam whispered stealthily. "A noblewoman, huh? Things sure aren't boring when you're around."

Orba silently stared at Marilène's back – she who was reviled in the city as a queen who had betrayed the country – and at the temple's interior. In this temple, there were none of the many images and statues found in Mephian temples. A dazzlingly gorgeous gold and silver band ran around the walls but apart from that there was nothing that attracted the eye.

"Now then, Dear Guests," Marilène turned around and gave them an inappropriately bewitching smile. "I did not idly help you. If I gave now you the order to relieve my boredom, what would you do? I hear there are gladiatorial ceremonies in Mephius. What if I told you to select a looser from within you and offer him up as a sacrifice before the altar?"

Shique bowed reverently,

"The one who gathered up our lives like flowers is the Lady Queen, the one who will discard our lives is also the Lady Queen. We will do as we are ordered."

"A man so admirable as to say such things is rarely seen," Marilène laughed, covering her lips with the back of her hand.

The priests brought cups of wine for the three of them. Marilène also took one.

"This is also a test of luck. Poison has been added to one of these. A deadly poison that was order from Salissa in the west. A few drops poured into wine are more than enough to kill several grown men. However, not all three of you have to drink. Won't one of you go first to drain your cup. Whether that man lives or dies, I will release all of you."

Shique and Gilliam exchanged looks. They couldn't guess what the queen’s real intentions were and so naturally their expressions were strained. After all, she was a woman who, when her husband had only just died in battle, had accepted a marriage proposal from a vassal who

had been involved in rebellion.

Orba for his part stared fixedly at the contents of the cup he had been given. In the faint light that illuminated it, it was of course impossible to tell whether or not the wine was dark from poison.

"What's wrong? Is it that Mephians prefer it to be gladiators after all?"

Marilène asked, spinning her wine cup in her hand. Her eyes sparkled, brimming with curiosity. Her expression was like that of a little girl as she played with the three men's lives.

Orba could see the mask and his own eyes reflected in the liquid. Their surroundings were so silent you could hear the sound of heartbeats.

Thinking about it... Orba became lost in thought while staring into his own eyes. *Thinking about it, for the past six years, my heart was only beating for the sake of killing Oubary.*

Now that objective is gone, what on earth is my blood flowing for, what do I go to sleep for, what do I face the morning for? Since leaving Mephius, he had become possessed by a strange sense of weariness.

Even if it was too far, even if it was too difficult, with revenge as a clear goal, Orba had been able to overcome any ordeal, no matter how harsh. No matter how impatient he had felt, he had been able to grit his teeth and look forward to that day. However now when he walked, there was nothing in the far distance that he had to aim for. No, even at a faltering pace, he could no longer take a single step forward.

Am I obsessed with Oubary? Now that he's gone, I eat, shit, roll myself up in a blanket and sleep – is that kind of ordinary thing all I can do?

In that bar in Helio, when he had heard the woman named Kay scream, what flashed through Orba's mind had been the image from more than six years earlier of his mother being grasped tightly by violent Garberan soldiers.

Black, muddy feelings had reared their head within Orba's breast. Viscous blood streamed towards the veins in his hands and feet. By the time he realised it, without understanding his own intentions, as though controlled by that black blood, Orba had knocked down the Red Hawks' soldier.

How long am I going to...

He had remained that boy who wandered about crying and screaming after leaving his native village.

"Orba!"

Shique and Gilliam cried together. Orba had tilted the wine cup towards him and swallowed its contents in one gulp.

"Oh!" Her eyes sparkling, Marilène emptied her own cup. "Those two can drink up too. This was just for fun. There was no poison from the start."

Having firmed their resolve, Shique and Gilliam poured the wine down their throats. It was alcohol of the finest quality, as different as could be expected from what was served in a rundown town district. There was no change to their condition either. It seemed to be confirmed that there was no poison.

After that, Marilène arranged for chairs for the three of them. They were asked a number of things about their home country of Mephius. Just as he had when they had previously been invited by Princess Esmena, Shique took charge of answering.

"Oh, so you were part of the Mephian gladiators that I have heard about," Marilène was comfortably leaning into a sofa. "That explains how you were able to knock down the Red Hawks' soldiers. I've been curious about this for a long time but are gladiators only men? Are there no women gladiators?"

"There are no women that are called gladiators. However, several times a year, dozens of women who wish to regain their freedom may be made to fight in the arena. They grapple bare-handed and also practically half-naked." "So they are made into a spectacle. But in order to gain their freedom, they are willing to be laughed at, made the objects of bets and to risk their lives fighting."

"As to that..."

"I would like to see it with my own eyes." Marilène emptied her second cup of wine.

Orba hadn't said a word during this time but suddenly, Marilène got up and stood right before him.

"Interesting," she suddenly said. "You are not afraid of me. No, in the first place, you are not even interested. Your eyes look exactly as though you have lost someone you love."

Through the mask, Orba's eyes looked agitated.

"Were you planning to die from the start and were searching for a battlefield on which to do so?"

"I – You must be joking."

Orba answered in a hoarse voice. As he boyishly seemed about to turn away his masked gaze, Marilène suddenly smiled.

"That's the sort of man who has the devil's own luck and who doesn't die. That will do, you may leave now. It is splendid to be skilled and brave, but it would be good if you did not act rashly in the future."

At Marilène's prompting, the three of them left the temple. As they breathed in the night air, which one of them was it who sighed? Even for gladiators who had experienced countless scenes of carnage, that scene just now was somewhat different from what they were used to.

"You seem to be good at provoking women's displeasure."

Gilliam said with a half-serious expression, but Orba once again remained silent. In his mind however, Marilène's words resounded again and again.

When the three of them had left the premises of the royal court,

"Yo-oh!"

The one in front of the gate waving his hand was Talcott. Next to him was Stan. As Gilliam approached baring his teeth threateningly, Stan took an exaggerated leap backwards.

"You escaped by yourselves pretty quickly."

"Oi, oi. We only got dragged into your fight. You should be grateful for our backup, there's no reason to blame us."

In reality, they had assumed the role of spectators without giving backup, however the fight with the Red Hawks had undoubtedly been caused by Orba and the others. Gilliam stopped, still growling, and Talcott smiled complacently.

"But anyway, you lot. It's good that you've come back safely."

"The gentleman in the mask found favour with a noblewoman," Shique said and Talcott looked at him blankly. Then realising that Red Hawks mercenaries were looking at them venomously from inside the gate, he mockingly stuck out his tongue with a Beh.

"Serves those bastards right. Anyway, let's go that shop again. As a celebration for beating those Red Hawks into a fit. Since it looks like Stan got quite a lot from gambling, I'll treat you to a cup this time." Talcott spoke as though it was his own money.

"For now, I think we need to go and report to Duncan-dono."

"Leave it. For one thing, he won't have heard of your release yet. C'mon, let's go, let's go!"

Although Talcott had at first disliked Orba and the others, now that trouble had arisen with an even more dislikeable bunch, he seemed to regard them as comrades. In that regard, he was every bit as simple as Stan.

Orba didn't have any particular objection either and the five of them went back to Kay's shop. The tables and chairs had been broken during the scuffle, but Talcott offered a tip, saying that "I there's nothing else, then the floor is fine." Her hair tied back, Kay shook her head left and right.

"No, I can't take it. You saved me after all."

"That's good but I can't agree with you continuing on with the shop," said Shique. "That Red Hawks bunch might trash it again in revenge."

"If I did that, it would mean losing against them. This shop is the one thing I cannot hand over." Behind her adult-like smile, Kay's stubbornness flickered in and out of view.

In the end, since she wasn't doing business, Kay took part in the mercenaries' modest banquet. Her younger brother Niels – who had a bad leg – also joined at the foot of the table after he had finished preparing some light snacks.

The topic of conversation jumped from this to that, but first Talcott had wanted to hear about how they had escaped from Greygun's underlings. After Shique and Gilliam had explained,

"Eh, so it was that beautiful queen," Talcott opened his eyes round. "But still, although I'm only looking at this from a distance, she really is a queen who has never known hardship. Do you think that even if Garda's army invaded, she alone would be spared because of her beauty?"

"Oh, I don't think that she has never known hardship," said Kay. Although she was young, she had since earlier been quaffing more drinks than the men.

"How's that? She's a country's queen, you know."

"Lady Marilène became a bride when she was only fourteen. Men are convinced that the trouble and suffering of a woman are trivial when she goes alone to be married in another land. And on top of that, to a man she had never even met and that she doesn't love in the slightest."

"Oh, come on, Sis! It's different than from commoners like us."

"Oh, did you just call me 'Sis'?"

Fourteen? Thought Orba. A fourteen-year-old girl going alone to be married in another land. To a man she doesn't even love, that she has never even met.

And on top of that, to a land that has been an enemy at war with her own country for ten years.

For a while now, a face other than Marilène's had appeared in his mind and refused to leave. "Tsk," Orba clicked his tongue. Sure enough, he wasn't good with alcohol.

"Sorry, but I can't sympathise with the queen," Talcott continued on that topic. "According to what I've heard, right after King Elargon died in battle, a messenger from Cherik went to see her. I bet they had it in mind to instigate the rebellion and then capture Helio with Cherik's might."

"I've heard that too," nodded Niels, his face still bearing conspicuous acne scars. "The wrath of the Dragon Gods will surely descend upon that queen someday. Cherik won't be able to do as it pleases with our Helio."

"And what can you do about it, you idiot? It would be much better if you thought of a new menu to attract customers."

Kay's father had set up the shop but just when it was starting to get on track, he was drafted and had never returned. This wasn't in the battle against Garda's army but in the attack more than ten years ago by none other than Mephius. Gilliam and the others looked uncomfortable at the talk about Mephius, but Kay shook her head,

"It's alright. There's a truce with Mephius, right? Since there's no more reason to fight, there's no use for quarrels and hatred. Niels however didn't get taken for a soldier against his will, he went off to fight without saying anything."

"Enough already with that. Don't scold me even in front of customers."

"What," Kay drunkenly picked a fight with her little brother. "You're acting cocky because we're in public. But you're usually crying and going Big Sister, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Niels' face turned red. He opened his mouth wide as though to shout something but,

"Please stop."

Shique and Gilliam looked surprised. The one who had spoken was Orba.

"After all, he's a man. He wants to rise upwards with a sword and doesn't want to made fun of in public."

"That..." Kay pouted.

"He wants to help his sister who is a woman managing a shop alone."

As Orba continued, she kept silent. Niels, embarrassed, he deliberately left and brought back more alcohol. When he returned, Kay murmured "Oh, I see".

"I suppose he won't just stay 'my little brother' forever."

"Ho-oh," Gilliam slung a brawny arm around Orba's neck.

"What the – Don't touch me, you reek of alcohol."

"What, you always get cocky. It's different from back then! Tarkas isn't here to break up fights and no one's legs are tied with chains."

"Yeah, it was only thanks to that that you escaped death so many times."

"You!"

The two of them seemed about to break into a scuffle at any moment when, "Stop it!" Kay broke in with surprising vigour. The two men were taken aback by the sorrow hidden in her eyes.

"Go outside if you're going to fight. I won't tolerate this shop being wrecked any more than it already is!"

As she shouted that, Talcott and Shique burst out laughing.

Chapter 4: The Battle at the Coldrin Hills

Part 1

Orba, Shique and Gilliam were all three of them punished by being put under house arrest. The same went for the platoon leader who had been so lacking in zeal for his supervisory duties. Locked up in the cramped private house, every time Orba or the others entered the corner of the platoon leader's field of vision, which was constantly, he hurled insults and curses at them. In the end, Gilliam threatened him.

"I'll stop you from ever being able to use that mouth again," and so the platoon leader didn't speak on the third day, although he hadn't been on the receiving end of any violence.

Red Hawks mercenaries also passed in front of the house once, laughing out loud in an unnatural way. The figures of those who had brawled in Kay's shop were among them.

"Those bastards used to be gladiators."

"Then a cramped cage suits them. Please don't feed the beasts without permission."

They laughed but at that moment, Shique's face appeared through a crack at that window.

"I'll remember your faces," he said with a smile. "We won't be in here for ever. You do understand that sooner or later, the wild beasts will be released into the fields. At the moment, you've gathered in a large crowd, but how long will that last? There's no one along the unlit streets at night, is there? At times like those, please watch your backs. A starving wild beast with gleaming claws and fangs might be lurking in the shadows, no longer locked up."

His features were like a woman's but as he narrowed his eyes while smiling, that face was somewhat chilling. The Red Hawks' laughter gradually faded and, spitting out words somewhere between contempt and justification, they left.

It was unusual for Shique to threaten like that. He seemed to very much bear a grudge over his face being hit.

Their circumstances back when they had been gladiators had been much harsher: it had been far more painful to have sword practice and to have to take care of the beasts during the hottest part of the day until they were dripping with sweat. Orba was far from having a patient personality. He had a goal he had to accomplish and for that purpose, he was a man who could endure waiting, be it three days or three years, but he had never been able to stand waiting for nothing.

By the fourth day, he was even considering deserting but luckily – if it could be called that – on the fifth day, the situation changed. Garda's forces finally departed from Eimen. They numbered roughly two thousand. A thousand had been left in Eimen as their base.

"I can't believe it."

It wasn't surprising that Bouwen spoke with suspicion as he folded his arms. The enemy totalled three thousand as they had absorbed most of the military strength of city after city that fell before them. It was said that hardly any soldiers had been left at the ruins of the Zer Illias temple, thought to be the headquarters of Garda's army.

"Garda's forces should have almost no control over the possessions they've only just seized. They should normally be leaving large numbers of soldiers there, yet they're using practically all of their increased army corps to advance. In the first place, it should be difficult to take command of the soldiers and it wouldn't be surprising if revolts arose in the cities."

"They must be controlling the people and soldiers through sorcery."

Greygun's answer was simple. He had received permission from King Jallah and they were finally to march. On their side, they numbered two thousand five hundred. They had the numerical advantage. The rumour among even the lowest-ranked soldiers was that although a general from Helio had been chosen to take command for the time being, he was no more than a figurehead and in practice, Greygun was the one who made the decisions.

Orba and the others were also released from house arrest. Duncan, the commander of the mercenary unit, had personally gone turned up for the occasion,

"The next time you get into a fight with the mercenaries from the Red Hawks," he had solemnly declared, "do it somewhere where nobody will notice."

He was a man with a strange sense of humour. Perhaps that was necessary for one who managed professional warmongers.

Helio's troops, Taúlia's troops, the Red Hawks led by Greygun and the mercenary corps led by a several commanders, starting with Duncan. Those forces started off, weaving their way through the crowd of spectators that thronged the road before the gate.

The vanguard consisted of Helio's regular cavalry. Behind them, amidst the sound of thundering footsteps, followed the dragoon corps. Speaking of the dragoon corps, their commander, the far-famed general Lasvius whose loyalty to Helio's royal family was absolute, had disappeared during the revolt following King Elargon's death. Because of that, their numbers had been reduced by half.

Behind Helio's army followed Taúlia's troops. Cavalry, dragoons, artillery then the mercenary corps led by Duncan followed in a line. They consisted of a hundred riders and three hundred and fifty foot soldiers, and naturally Orba was among those infantrymen. They advanced hoisting their long spears.

Although he was heading into battle wearing the military gear he had longed for as a child, pennons fluttering bravely, marching while being seen off by a great crowd of people, the haze within Orba's heart had still not cleared.

Then, before the passed through the gate, Shique who was walking beside him, nudged him with his elbow.

Looking in the direction he indicated, there were Kay and her brother Niels among the crowd. The two of them were waving their hands and he inadvertently waved back. No matter that they were headed towards mortal peril, when the soldiers were greeted by the cheers of the crowd, for that one proud moment, every one of them was a hero who didn't fear death. The tramping of their footsteps and the clatter of their equipment resounded. Even if the kings of the various countries were turning over all sorts of ingenious schemes, even if the fight had started through all sorts of ambitions, what each and every soldier was fighting was a crusade to protect the country they were born and raised in, their family and neighbours.

However,

Both for gladiators and for mercenaries,

The torrents of cheers and the looks from the people seeing them off didn't hold any meaning at all. Orba walked at the centre of space that had been painted entirely grey.

The last to pass through the gate were the Red Hawks, commanded by Greygun. Five hundred of them were leaving for the front, with two hundred remaining along with fifty of Helio's regular soldiers to defend the city.

The line of military troops left Helio behind.

The sky was cloudy.

The wind was dry.

"Lord Hardross, it is bad for your health. Please return to your room."

Hardross Helio stood on the rooftop of a tower projecting from the castle walls. The woollen mantle he wore over his toga was fluttering.

Without responding to the chamberlain's appeal, he continued to gaze down in silence on the crowd below until he tired of it, then suddenly turned to face southwards and narrowed his eyes. When the weather was good, one could see the shadow of the forest surrounding Lake Soma in the far distance.

Hardross was contemplating Lake Soma with particular attention.

The land around the lake was fertile and it had been an important grain-producing region since the days of Zer Tauran. East of that lake was Helio, and south of it was Cherik. The two countries had competed countless times for supremacy over it.

Because it was fertile land, naturally not only those two countries but other powers as well aimed for Lake Soma and had constantly kept a vigilant eye on it. Their claws and fangs gleaming, they had waited for the two countries to weaken.

And so, as that land risked being easily snatched away, Hardross Helio had proposed an alliance with Cherik. They pledged that they would have joint jurisdiction over the pasture land, farms and fields, and that they would divide the harvest in even halves.

The result of Cherik's consent was that as proof of the alliance, Marilène had left Cherik to marry into Helio twelve years earlier. Although still only fourteen at the time, the girl already possessed an adult-like beauty. Hardross had rejoiced more than anyone at the arrival of this emissary of friendship. Because he was so innocently delighted, his subjects had gossiped that *His Majesty Hardross might be intending to make the young princess queen*.

His successor Elargon was an only child born when Hardross had been in his mid-thirties. He had raised him with great care and it was heart-warming to see the king exulting over going to greet his son's bride. Moreover, his son's generation was promised the rich blessings of Lake Soma without there being war with Cherik. For Hardross, there had been a sense that his work as king was complete.

But now,

Elargon had died in battle and his grandchild Rogier, born to Elargon's concubine, had disappeared. It was the same as saying that apart from himself, the royal lineage had died out. Princess Marilène of Cherik whom he had been so happy to welcome sat next to some man who was in the position of king and yet whose name Hardross didn't recognise, while among the people and in the shadows it was whispered more and more that she intended to sell Helio out to Cherik.

I must endure for now.

Hardross continued to gaze in the direction in which he had once spurred his frail body to run through battlefields, the direction that would be filled with the deep blue of Lake Soma.

The rampage of that accursed Garda's army has to be safely held in check.

He vowed to himself that when that time came, he would be awaiting the final task for the former King Hardross.

It was said that having left Eimen, Garda's army was advancing through the grasslands that spread north of Helio. The area was a region dotted with nomadic herders, but it seemed unlikely that they would oppose troops two thousand strong. The combined Zerdian forces on the other hand were advancing towards the Coldrin Hills, which lay northwest of Helio and northeast of Lake Soma, at roughly the same distance from both if you drew a straight line.

North of the hills was the steppe. The only pass through which a great number of people could advance was a narrow one, and Greygun's strategy was for the main body of their troops to take up position on the high grounds there.

"The enemy probably has airships," was the assessment made by the upper echelons of Greygun and the others' forces.

According to rumour, Garda's army possessed three large aircrafts and instead of installing guns on the ground, they fired from the air and massacred all indiscriminately.

As the Tauran countries were not close to the sea and the routes for purchasing ether were scattered, supply was unstable. It was therefore an accepted opinion that the Tauran countries were vulnerable to air battles.

"Where the hell is Garda getting ether from? Even a sorcerer can't produce it out of thin air!"

Advancing in front of Orba and the others, their platoon leader grumbled complainingly.

Also, according to another rumour, the people in the areas that Garda controlled were treated like slaves. The women were taken away and it seemed that most of them were sacrificed during strange, suspicious ceremonies. The men saw their families and lovers taken hostage and were forced to take the path of soldiers. It was said that black smoke rose incessantly from the cities occupied by Garda's army.

"It's a secret ritual of Garda's sorcery," someone murmured as though telling a ghost story when they ate their crude meal around the open fire late at night. "They say he makes ether from living humans. That's why he needs so many sacrifices. Actually, they say that when the

historical Garda performed powerful spells, he also demanded a proportional number of sacrifices."

Just as Orba had previously heard from Stan, it was claimed that Garda sank those sacrifices into Lake Kurán. There was such a history, or at least various legends, handed down about Kurán.

Another story was that not long after Zer Tauran had collapsed, a powerful clan which had settled in the area had apparently planned to build a town on the lake's estuary as part of the northern trade route. However, as the people in charge died of illness one after another, the project remained at a standstill. Consequently, ships coming from the north had to unload their cargo at the mouth of the river and take an overland route towards the south.

As the people in Tauran were superstitious, when a strong wind sometimes blew in the dead of night, the soldiers would look at each other uneasily. It was as though the wind was blowing through skulls abandoned in the wilderness and the tune it played was the same as the wailing of departed souls.

Their opponent was a magician whose true nature was unknown and who might use any kind of strange art – enemy soldiers might suddenly appear right here, or a monstrous bird or dragon manipulated by magic might come from the sky, or perhaps Garda himself might step out from the deep shadows and lay a death curse upon everyone there – and the Zerdians remembered their dread.

Probably sensing the soldiers' unease, Greygun was continuously choosing the best riders out of his own men and sending them out as scouts. This backfired however when, just before the Coldrin Hills, one of the scouts failed to return.

Greygun had the main force advance with caution. To march while feeling uneasy about the possibility of a surprise attack put the soldiers under stress. It had to be said however that as was characteristic of them, the Red Hawks mercenaries alone threw their chests out and roared as though unconcerned by superstitions.

But –

When they arrived at the upwards slanting terrain with the Coldrins right before their eyes, Greygun gave the order to halt the march.

The enemy troops had already taken up position on the high plateaus overlooking where they were.

Part 2

"What is this!" Bouwen muttered in utter surprise, almost inadvertently letting go of the reins he had grasped in his hands.

And no wonder. According to the scouts' most recent reports, even if they had leisurely taken their time to line up their formations, their enemy should still not have reached the hilly area until a day later.

"You must be joking, is this also the so-called sorcery of Garda's army?"

At this rate, Orba thought while he could hear the soldiers loudly yelling the same thing, *the enemy will very soon be in sight of Helio*.

To the troops that had marched from Helio, the first low slopes of the Coldrin Hills looked like castle ramparts. They broke through the ground's surface and rose up to where the plateaus spread out. The enemy seemed to have established their headquarters there. Even more worryingly, they had set up an artillery battery at both the east and west of the hill range. Contrary to the rumours, there didn't appear to be any large ships. However,

"The enemy must have carried their soldiers here by ship. In that case, we have to attack quickly and snatch away the high ground before they arrive with reinforcements," insisted Greygun.

Certainly their opponent did not number the 'two thousand' reported by the scouts. There were no more than perhaps half that many.

"With that in mind, we should also install guns on the heights in order to intercept the ships."

It would be dark in less than two hours. Which also meant that if they successfully seized control of the Coldrins by then and if they enemy were to arrive with reinforcements during the night, they might also be able to capture the ships by skilfully using the cover of darkness.

Those two hours would be decisive for the confrontation. Once the sun had set, defensively speaking, the enemy side encamped in the highlands would be in a much more advantageous position. The fires lit by the attacking side would become targets for the guns and cannons, and since they would be unsure of the ground beneath their feet in the dark, a charge was also unlikely to succeed.

There were of course those who showed disapproval of Greygun's tactics but, just as the soldiers had gossiped, that mercenary commander had seized full power. As soon as their

headquarters had been established, he called together all the commanding officers.

As they judged that there would soon be a fight, the soldiers' mental strain also increased all at once.

"What's the opponent's status?"

"According to the scouts sent out on reconnaissance, they seem like perfectly normal Zerdians. Nothing like the demons and fire drakes that accompany Garda in the legends."

"Shit, why are those Zerdians obeying that sorcerer?"

All around was the sound of weapons being inspected and prepared. As they were at a distance, the enemy shouldn't be able to notice, but even so the atmosphere was so tense that every so often someone would go "Shh!" to quieten the noise.

Duncan returned from headquarters.

"Well then, you warmongers who've sold your lives for money," he said to Taúlia's four hundred and fifty mercenaries, his voice carrying clearly, "you have been honoured to receive a task that will make it easy for you to distinguish yourselves by service in the face of danger."

Having learned from the scouts that the enemy's right flank was thin, Greygun planned to intentionally put on a display of clashing from the front then attacking by manoeuvring around the left-wing. The mission for Taúlia's mercenary unit that Orba and the others belonged to was to suppress the eastern artillery battery near the enemy's left-wing. They were to make a straight charge and attract as much attention as possible to their fight.

"Raise a racket, charge then return. While the enemy fire is turned this way, General Bouwen will head to te front. When things begin in earnest, Greygun's main force will rush out from the rear."

From the front? As was to be expected, there was a stir among the mercenaries. Bouwen's unit which intended to break through at the front would borrow a hundred cavalrymen from the mercenary unit and would combine with Helio's main troop, but even so Helio's forces amounted to no more than two hundred. As for Greygun's Red Hawks, half would be sent as a detached force to the left flank while the remaining half would be waiting at headquarters, poised to join in the assault led by Bouwen's forces. In other words, the reinforcements sent by other countries had been placed in the most dangerous positions.

We're being provoked, Orba thought inwardly. He had only met Bouwen directly once or twice, but he was still a young commander. Whereas Greygun was undoubtedly a veteran.

He must have taken the choice away from Bouwen by saying something like "Can the central breakthrough really be left to Taúlia's fighters?" And the mercenaries had gotten the short end of the stick. In a sense, charging the battery was an even more dangerous task than that of Bouwen's troop.

How will we do it? Orba wondered. For example, they could feign to throw a large force at the enemy's weak right flank then immediately change course after the charge began. Then at the opportunity created when the enemy moved in pursuit, they could attack the battery. That way there should be few sacrifices.

But he was no longer a country's crown prince and Orba didn't think that anyone would listen to the advice of a simple private soldier. For a private soldier, the decisions made at the top were absolute. At Zaim Fortress and then at Apta, Orba had had his orders thoroughly enforced.

"Dammit, it's your lot's fault for annoying Greygun," Talcott said bitterly, while repeatedly pulling his sword in and out of its scabbard. "Thanks so much for the chance at a 'great achievement'. Do you think Kay will let me court her if I dangle enough enemy heads at her?"

Recently Orba had realised that Talcott didn’t always mean it when he cursed at him. It was as though he didn't know when to shut up and always said whatever came to mind without thinking about it first.

"Stan, as usual I'll leave it to your intuition to decide where I run to. I believe in you so stay in front of me."

"Got it, Brother."

It seemed that this was how the two of them went around battlefields. Stan went trusting his kind of supernatural intuition and Talcott followed behind. And because they had survived so far by doing so, they had a blind faith that this time too everything would be alright.

To different degrees, most soldiers who risked their lives in war each had a superstition or a jinx. When cutting down an enemy, never slash at them diagonally from the left; if you break into a charge with your right foot first, enemy arrows and bullet won't be able to hit you; if hidden under your armour you carry a lucky charm given by a lover, you will definitely survive and return... Another way of saying it was that without some kind of belief to cling to, they wouldn't have been able to face a battlefield of flying bullets and swinging blades.

Thinking about it, didn't Alice say that she'd given a lucky charm to Roan? He had heard about it from Alice after his brother had gone to Apta. He had regretted it then: if he had thought about it sooner, he would have given his brother something too. To the very last, Alice had never told him what that lucky charm had been.

Not good, not good.

Orba shook his masked face left and right. When had it been – at Solon's imperial court or when he had been leading a gang of boys in Birac – he had read a note from a soldier who had stood on the battlefield. If you thought about a dead person when on the battlefield, you too would be possessed by death. And,

Roan died.

It was a cruel truth. He had died as a private soldier, carrying a lucky charm, following orders from above.

On the battlefield, death was always by the soldiers' side, waiting impatiently. Even Orba who had so often escaped from the very verge of death could easily lose his life to a single stray bullet if he let down his guard.

Orba forced himself to give himself encouragement.

"I'm going to live."

"What's the matter, Orba?"

"Nothing," Orba answered Shique, who looked like he had come to check on him, as he made sure of the weight of the sword in his hand.

The day started to grow dark.

As per Greygun's instructions, the mercenary unit had begun their assault. The plan was that the main body of Taúlia's troops, led by Bouwen, would soon attempt to break through at the front. For when that time came, the mercenaries were to fight like all hell or the main forces risked being annihilated by enemy gunfire.

For that purpose, Bouwen had passed guns to the mercenaries. Although since they weren't long-range rifles, they wouldn't be able to take up a safe position and shoot from there.

"Right, line up before going off to be reckless. You're going to be shields against the guns. I'll keep your names and faces in mind so after this, if you survive, come on forward. I'll give you your money three times over."

Duncan had quickly devised a battle plan.

The sun was finally approaching the horizon and the ridges of the Belgana Summits formed a crimson border.

It was the moment when Duncan handed down the order to "Go!" They opened fire on a look-out tower while an artillery platoon loaned out by the main force advanced from the east hill, camouflaged within the narrow trees that grew there.

This was the signal for the start of the battle at the Coldrin Hills.

At a sign that the enemy was in disorder, allied voices rose vigorously from all around. Enemy fire opened in counter-attack from the top of the hills. When Duncan swung down his arm, tens of the mercenaries who had been designated as gun shields, each with their preferred weapons in their hands, raced upwards.

The enemy soldiers guarding the battery on the hill probably numbered about two hundred. Lined up side-by-side, the enemy gunners took aim and fired at the mercenaries below. Several lives were lost that way. Immediately after though, most of the mercenaries nimbly leapt about left and right.

Then guns opened a gaping hole in the enemy's front. They had been pulled there by Yunion dragons and had been installed under the cover of the soldiers' charge.

Boom. Boom, boom. The thunderous roar shook the area around Orba. The first impact struck the ground halfway up the hill, the second ploughed through the position of the enemy gunners. The smell of gunpowder assailed Orba's nose.

"Now! Take it!"

There was no plan for after that. Nothing but to charge. For one moment, the enemy's spirits could be seen to be overwhelmed, but that didn't change the advantage of their position on higher ground. A second group of riflemen immediately took up position. Orba also dashed forward, a spear in one hand.

Over his slouched back, he heard the nearby whine of bullets flying swiftly by.

Tsk.

Things like skill with the sword no longer had any bearing on survival.

"Kya!"

The soldier running to his right screamed like a woman. His lower leg had been shot through and he fell backwards. With no time for so much as a sidelong glance, Orba raced on. His heart beat faster with every step and he ran as though flying. Finally, the distance seemed to have been covered but then suddenly, the mercenaries running in front of him scattered left and right.

Looking up, a row of spearheads formed a single, glaring line. A group of enemy cavalry had galloped down.

One of the ones at the front swung his spear and the head of a mercenary who hadn't escaped in time went flying. He probably hadn't even noticed when he crossed the border between life and death.

Orba kicked at the ground to leap sideways and put some distance between himself and the group. But the soldiers who escaped that way were gunned down from above. One by one, one after another, bodies riddled with holes fell and went tumbling down the hill.

The lancers galloped down with unabated vigour, broke through the crowd waiting for them below and turned to the north side of the hill. They would be charging once again.

Orba crouched under a slightly overhanging wall of rock.

"What about the artillery on our side?"

Talcott and Stan were under the same wall of rock. Both their faces were drenched in sweat, but they didn't seem to be injured.

It looked as though the riflemen were hesitating as to whether they should be covering the soldiers who were rushing upwards or ambushing the cavalry that was returning from below.

"Shit, they’re useless! Shall we go and give them a talking to?"

"Brother, wait! That's Kurun from our platoon."

Looking at it, Kurun was standing unsteadily in a place with almost no protection. Blood flowed from his side, probably from where a rider had slashed at him.

A foot soldier ran down the hill to where he was. The face under the helmet was young. Maybe he was looking for an achievement or maybe he was bent on challenging Kurun because he looked like an easy target.

"I'll do it," Orba made a quick decision. "I'll bring Kurun here."

"Why do I -"

"Got it."

Stan's response was the faster.

Ignoring the cursing Talcott, Orba timed the interval in the enemy gunfire and leapt out.

At the third step, a bullet ricochetted by his feet.

Phew. With that kind of timing, he whistled unintentionally.

"Augh!"

About to jump out at Kurun with his sword, the soldier's angry voice broke into a squeak as he just managed to repel Orba's spear. In his hurry, his opponent dropped the sword that he had swung overhead for the second time. He was too close to stab. Orba hit him in the face with his hilt. His opponent collapsed backwards, his face up. Just as he was about to deal him the final blow, his allies started concentrating their fire in their direction, probably as protective covering.

"Retreat, retreat!"

"Over here, Kurun."

Orba and Stan, along with Kurun who they were pulling by the hands, hurried through a rain of bullets and crowded under the same wall of rock as earlier.

"Oi, you alright?"

"Ye-Yeah."

His wound appeared to be superficial. However, Kurun's face was covered in beads of sweat and his breath was ragged. More than his body, it was his heart that had been at been at bay. Stan patted his back,

"Come on, pull yourself together. Breathe calmly. But I watched the enrolment test and you, weren't your sword skills pretty good?"

"T-This is my first time on a battlefield, I'm an apprentice."

"Is there such a thing as a mercenary apprentice?"

It looked as though Duncan had issued an appeal to the artillery unit as the Taúlian side also attacked by opening fire from below. One hit landed on the crest of the hill, sending earth and sand flying. If the enemy line of fire veered away to the cannons, that would create a chance to attack. Orba carefully looked around.

"Did you see who was leading the cavalry? Hell, that was definitely Moldorf," Talcott spoke in his ear.

"Moldorf?"

"You don't know him? Moldorf, the Red Dragon of Kadyne. His younger brother is the Blue Dragon, Nilgif. Both brothers are matchless generals. Garda managed to make even the likes them surrender to him! Still, if we defeat them, there'll be an extra special bonus."

Just then, they heard the roar of the dragoon unit's war cries. No doubt at Duncan's request, the main force had changed trajectory. Their mobilisation showed flexibility and proved the mutual understanding between Duncan and Bouwen.

As Orba had judged, when the enemy fire began to concentrate on the guns, Tengo riders galloped upwards in one go, causing the enemy's aim to become unfocussed.

"Kurun, stay here."

Orba crouched down and once more broke into a run. Behind him followed Stan, then Talcott.

Several of the Tengo riders" dragons fell to bullets, but the group itself didn't lose speed. The dragons' leg strength steadily carried them up the slope. Finally, they flew over the fence and leapt towards the artillery unit. "You bastards!"

A roar like thunder seemed to come crashing down from overhead, and the front Tengo riders were sent flying from their dragons. It was Moldorf. He wore red armour and a helmet in the shape of a dragon. He lightly wielded an unusually long spear, and not a single one of the mercenaries was going to pass.

"You soldiers of Taúlia, know that I am the Red Dragon Moldorf! If you value your lives, turn back."

A dragon barred their way uphill. Every time that dragon roared, dragoon riders were mowed down left and right. Sprays of blood rained down as he wielded his three-pronged spear, which looked as though it could inflict wounds that would not heal in a lifetime.

"Wait for the artillery unit to arrive."

Orba had no intention of halting his racing steps. A rush of wind howled behind his ears. Inside his head, blood was swirling in a whirlpool strong enough to carry everything away. No unnecessary thing was left. Onwards and onwards, all that was needed was to lose his body and mind in a feverish urge to kill.

Moldorf noticed Orba's figure, as he rushed headlong on. From the perspective of the long-serving general, he truly had a small build. Buried beneath his moustache, Moldorf's mouth split into a grin.

"Whoa-ho, I'd need to dismount. There'd be no glory in killing you. I'll let you off."

Without answering, without even a single yell, Orba plunged with a spear. He was far away. Moldorf lightly swung his trident. A single breath from the dragon smashed Orba's spear – and even as it happened, Orba had already pulled out a sword with his right hand and with terrifying speed aimed for Moldorf's face.

"What!"

He hurriedly turned his spear to repel the blow. Orba staggered to the right but then braced his feet firmly on the ground and thrust at the horse-riding Moldorf again and then again.

"Ha, ha! I'll do it!"

As though he were training new recruits, Moldorf jabbed in every direction, lashed out and slashed downwards. But not one blow landed. Every time –

T-This guy! Orba's sword aimed for the horse's neck. Just as he was about to defend against it, the gleam from the sword changed trajectory. A rush of air swept by the tip of Moldorf's nose. Moldorf tried to spur his horse to create a distance, but the ferocity of Orba's attack didn't leave a single opportunity to do so.

During that time, one after another, the mercenaries reached the top of the hill. The artillerymen had thrown aside their guns and foot soldiers raced forward to cover their retreat, but in the hand-to-hand fights that broke out, the mercenaries had the impetus of victory.

"Orba!"

Gilliam and Shique belatedly arrived and joined in as Orba's reinforcements.

"Tsk. We'll have to postpone this contest."

Assessing the situation at a glance, Moldorf pulled on his horse's reins and moved to escape. He galloped towards the opposite slope from the one Orba and the others had climbed up. It could be called an excellent way to quit.

With that, they gained complete control of the gun battery.

"Good, turn the guns around. We'll fire them at the enemy headquarters to back up General Bouwen's assault," said Duncan as soon as he arrived.

At those instructions, the mercenaries with their blood-soaked swords and armour unanimously roared out a battle cry.

Part 3

We won.

Every one of the mercenaries thought so. There was still no sign of enemy ships in the sky. In other words, there were no reinforcements coming.

And in addition, looking down from the hill, Taúlia's main force under General Bouwen was sweeping through irresistibly. Ahead of the protective fire from the captured hill, they had already driven the enemy higher and higher, and were now within a stone's throw of attacking the enemy headquarters.

Gilliam grinned broadly.

"Look, at their headquarters. They're steadily drawing back. They're just a cobbled together mish-mash that Garda bullied into fighting for him after all. They're fine as long as they've got momentum on their side, but they're no good in face-to-face fight."

Is that really the case? - the thought flashed through Orba's mind. If that was the case, how had so many states fallen to Garda's army in such a short amount of time? An idea occurred to him,

A trap.

However, as at that point the bulk of Greygun's forces had begun to move from the rear, if the enemy had set some kind of trap, not even Orba could tell what it was. It had been decided that Greygun would assail the weak left flank, but at this rate, they had the momentum to break through from the front. As for Bouwen, it looked like he would be able to triumph over Greygun with this.

"Catch your breath. We'll wait for Greygun's main troops to turn as reinforcements then join up with them," Duncan went around clapping each one's shoulder in turn. The man was a tireless walker. As he was drawing towards Orba,

"Oi, enemies! Hidden themselves."

At that voice, the soldiers who had started to relax instantly leapt into action. What they dragged out however was a single enemy soldier. Moreover, an injured soldier who couldn't walk and who had been left behind.

Duncan stepped up to him. When Orba looked at him, it was the man who had been about to

cut down Kurun. No, rather than a man, once his helmet was removed the face that was revealed looked like a boy's. His age couldn't be different from Orba's. He seemed to have been trampled by a dragon and his right leg was mangled. Duncan took a water canteen from one of the soldiers and held it out to boy's lips.

"Which state are you from?"

"Eimen."

Water spilled from the side of his mouth as he answered. His face was pale.

"Why are you following the likes of Garda? Do you actually believe he really is a sorcerer who's awoken from several hundred years of sleep?"

"I don't know if he is the real Garda," the boy said with a look that seemed to see that he wasn't sure what was a dream and what was reality, "but his sorcery is real. Nobody can defy him."

"Is it true that the cities' women, children and elderly are held hostage and the men forced to fight?"

"Yeah... Me too, my mother and little sister were taken hostage. My father was murdered where he stood for resisting Garda's soldiers. My mother was made an example of and was offered as a sacrifice, and to save my little sister, I had no choice but to become a soldier."

As he was sometimes overcome by violent choking, just saying that much took him time. A heavy atmosphere hung among the mercenaries and no one was able to say a thing.

"I understand your situation, but even Garda is only human. Among that collection of soldiers, wasn't there anyone with the guts to incite you all to stand up against Garda? No, it's not too late yet. If we attack Zer Illias, you guys can stoke the fires of insurrection from the inside and..."

"Attack Zer Illias?"

Despite the situation, the boy laughed scornfully.

"That's absurd. Besides, Garda, he's – always watching us. He's always observing us."

"Observing how? Or maybe, is Garda himself in that camp over there?"

"That's not what I mean. But in a sense, you're right. Garda isn't one, he can be anywhere. Maybe he's behind you. Your home country will probably become a sea of flames just for thinking about opposing him."

Duncan pulled a face that showed that he didn't understand the meaning of those words. Was the meaning that they were being misled by magic, or was it that one of Garda's confidants was keeping a close watch on each military unit?

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like nothing but one of Garda's tricks, so Duncan cut the conversation short and had each of the platoon leaders assembled their soldiers into formation.

"Oh, where's our esteemed platoon leader?" Talcott wondered idly. "I haven't seen him since he gave the order to charge."

But that was the last time that the mercenaries were able to smile. Greygun's main force had finally started out and their own preparations for the assault were arranged in time, when an unbelievable scene unfolded right before their eyes.

"Go!"

Straddling a black horse, Greygun waved his hand and three hundred of his men hurtled down like an avalanche to attack Taúlia's main force from the rear.

"What!"

Naturally, Bouwen's troops were one-sidedly overwhelmed by the unexpected assault. The cavalrymen with the blazing red hawk pattern on their chests severed the heads of the Taúlian soldiers, skewered their hands and feet with their spears, or trampled them beneath their horses' hooves. As the hill's slope filled with screams, Garda's troops which had seemed about to retreat altered their course by a hundred and eighty degrees.

As though by mutual agreement - no, in reality, that is what it was – the two armies caught Taúlia's troops in a pincer attack. From their position at the battery above, they could see Bouwen's horse rear upwards.

The mercenaries watched in utter shock.

"That bastard Greygun, h-he betrayed us?" No sooner had he spoken than Duncan had leapt on his horse. "Follow my lead! Forget battle formations. We're going to save General Bouwen!"

"Wait!"

Orba cried out reflexively. Duncan shot him the same look he would an enemy.

"What!"

"Leave about two platoons here. Once Bouwen is escaping, force your way through this front.

The enemy will be chasing after, so by attacking them from the side, it'll be possible to slow their pursuit."

"Your platoon leader isn't here, huh? Right, I'll leave Rouno's archery platoon here as well. Rouno, you're in charge!"

The mood now was already only for dragging Bouwen away from the slaughter at the Coldrin Hills and escaping. Duncan kicked his horse's flank and started racing down the slope.

"Keep up, keep up! In this fight, losing the general means defeat. And then you won't get paid either!"

Thud, thud, thud – the horses' hooves drilled innumerable holes in the hill's slope, kicking up a cloud of dust through which the foot soldiers charged, their spears at the ready.

Only the six of them – Orba, Shique, Gilliam, as well as Talcott, Stan and Kurun – as well as the seven from Rouno's platoon remained on the hill.

Orba fixedly focused his gaze beyond that cloud of dust but,

"I've thought about it," said Talcott, "Let's get out of here."

"I-Idiot," Kurun answered. "That damn traitor. I won't be satisfied until I've sliced through Greygun's neck!"

Looking to be in agreement, Gilliam hefted his beloved battle-ax onto his shoulder.

"That fucking shithead, Greygun. He was always looking down on us as though he was a king and he's gone and tied himself to Garda."

"At any rate, this is a lost battle. For mercenaries, it's vital to know when to quit."

"That's Brother for you: working for free is what Brother hates the most."

Among the mercenaries whose feelings were frayed and on edge, Orba alone gazed cool-headedly at the battlefield through his mask. The heat in his blood had cooled compared to when he had rushed ahead, intent only on the sword in his hand. It was a strange characteristic of his. In an unfavourable situation, when he was cornered to the point of being driven against the wall, Orba's head was clear and chillingly cool. Rough voices flying past each other, the stench of gunpowder, the glitter of swords and the red sprays of blood. If he was amongst those, he could forget himself and be no more than a swordsman eager only to swing his sword once more, but if he took a single step back from them and surveyed his surroundings from a distance, in that instant, he would come back to himself as though his skin had been hit with water cascading from a high waterfall.

Orba went up to platoon leader Rouno. He was getting guns ready. As they would be covering for Bouwen's troops with arrowheads, it seemed they would be able to use them at once.

"Can you shoot that way?"

Orba suddenly pointed to a corner of the hill. It was a spot away from the mêlée. And for a moment, Rouno looked over his shoulder as though startled. He was around forty and was a man who gave the impression of being some kind of craftsman rather than a military officer. Whatever it was he felt upon hearing Orba's cool voice at a time when the others were on edge, Rouno nodded to his fellow mercenary.

"We can. To provoke unease among the enemy, right?"

"Yeah. Just before Duncan's group joins the mêlée would be best. The enemy's morale might be perturbed if they think we're willing to go as far as to get our allies caught up in it."

According to what that boy soldier had said, the enemy fought so desperately because their family and their birthplace had been taken hostage. Even though that gave them a reason to fight, it didn't follow that they were intent on exterminating their opponents at all cost. Orba judged that they should crumble easily in an unexpected situation.

"Got it," Rouno agreed. Orba's tone of voice had a ring that was characteristic of a person who was used to giving orders. In this situation, it also helped that his mask helped to make it difficult to judge his age. Even though he hadn't deliberately calculated such a thing, Orba was aware of a point of heat in his chest that was like a lit fire as he returned to his companions and confirmed their arrangements for what was to come.

Runo's group readied their arrows while Orba and the others sat astride horses left behind by the enemy soldiers. "Let's go!" At Rouno's shout of encouragement, a cannon was fired with a bang.

Slightly away from where friend and foe were mingled in mêlée, an explosion blew away part of the hilly terrain's surface. Obvious agitation appeared within Garda's troops. Without wasting any time, Duncan's mercenary group cleaved through the battlefield like an arrow, parting it in two. Greygun's troops divided to the left and right of them, they made their way to the centre and galloped to General Bouwen's side.

"Once more, this time towards the other side."

"Understood," Rouno nodded, his face sooty from the fumes of the gun's discharge.

At that moment,

"Enemy incoming!"

Talcott yelled. Perhaps they had sensed the threat from the battery as the enemy was reacting faster than expected.

"Tsk. It's Moldorf. The cavalry is coming!"

Clicking his tongue, Orba pulled on his reins, his spear in his hand.

"I'll pull them away. Rouno's group, back me up with your arrows."

Below them to one side, angry roars resounded as swords and spears, axes and hammers collided. Once again, the battery position became a scene of thick, frenzied bloodshed.

In the midst of that, Orba observed the mounted warrior clad in red. Moldorf's expression was overflowing with fierce energy. He looked up from the bottom of the hill and saw Orba.

"You. The masked man."

"Oh? Hadn't you run away, Red Dragon?"

"And let you off?"

As Moldorf galloped upwards, Rouno's group unleashed a flood of arrows. Those left and right of the dragon warrior fell, but Moldorf plunged on without a care. Shique came flying towards them.

"Orba, General Bouwen broke out of the pincer attack. He and Captain Duncan are headed this way."

"Leave Moldorf to me. You guys break through the enemy's flank then join up with Bouwen."

"And you?"

"I'll catch up with you later," Orba said shortly. Shique fixed his eyes on Orba's profile for a short while then,

"Got it. We'll meet again later. Definitely!"

He lightly turned back towards Gilliam and the others. At that moment, Moldorf's figure drew close at hand. He was the sort of man who would overwhelm an enemy's spirit on the battlefield. Each time his horse took a step closer, that figure seemed to swell two or three times larger. Steam seemed to rise around him.

Part 4

It was a terrible fight.

Friend and foe were jumbled together at close range, there were neither positions nor battle formations and all anyone could do was swing their weapon of choice at those who stood out as opponents. Among the mercenaries who had suffered Greygun's betrayal, it was impossible to tell who was an enemy and who was an ally, and so there were allies who killed each other by mistake.

Amidst that, Duncan finally managed to get away from the free-for-all fight and, at a gallop, escort Bouwen to the hill.

"General, you are safe."

"Where is Greygun?" Bouwen asked hoarsely. He was half lying atop his horse. His shoulder was broken. And the one who had smashed it was that very same Greygun. When the Red Hawk unit had drawn up to them from the rear, Bouwen had made the mistake of reacting too slowly. He hadn't been able to believe their betrayal.

"If he's alive, we'll meet him and face him again."

Duncan encouraged him, though his own limbs were covered in inumerable injuries. Even just now, he had taken a spear to the shoulder from enemy riders in hot pursuit. He had smashed it by force and, brandishing a longsword, had cleaved open his opponent's skull.

"Bouwen's head. Take his head! There'll be a reward from General Greygun!"

Like vultures flocking towards carrion, the Red Hawks swarmed. Shique, Gilliam and the others plunged headlong down from the side.

The soldiers who had come galloping up to the side of Bouwen's horse were sent flying from their saddle by Gilliam's ax. Shique meanwhile jabbed at a Red Hawk soldier who was moving in on a pincer attack towards the spear-wielding Duncan.

"Oh?" Shique smiled as a spurt of blood splashed across his face. "It's you."

It was the man who had hit Shique. For a moment, he glared at Shique hatefully then fell from his horse with a crash.

In that time, Orba was still defending the battery position to the death. Before the enemy could

move into a mop-up operation, the gun was preparing to fire another shot. In order for that to happen, he couldn't let Moldorf pass. However,

"Your back is light. You won't hit me with a spear that way."

Orba was embarrassingly unused to fighting on horseback. Against Moldorf, who was an expert at handling a spear from atop a horse, he was at a disadvantage. While Rouno's platoon readied their guns' aim, Orba could only engage in a defensive fight.

"Aren't you coming, boy?"

Reading his opponents' intentions, Moldorf decided on a forcible breakthrough. His impetus was such that he looked like he was going to slam into the other horse. And that was the chance that Orba had been waiting for. Maintaining his posture with his back lightly raised, Orba suddenly pulled his feet out of the stirrups, kicked himself off the horse's back and leapt. Losing its target, the spear tore through empty space.

"Guh!"

While jumping off, Orba gave a single jab with his spear and struck Moldorf in the back. But it didn't pierce through the armour. Even so, his breath agonisingly knocked out of him, Moldorf tumbled from his horse and was forced to hear the roar of another shot from the cannon.

"Good, retreat. Retreat."

Orba shouted as though he were a commanding officer. He quickly grabbed Moldorf's horse.

"W-Wait!" The Red Dragon of Kadyne yelled while getting to his feet. "This match isn't settled yet!"

"We'll have to postpone it."

Orba who responded thus was far from being uninjured. Rather, of the two, he had received a greater number of wounds. However, without so much as a groan of pain, Orba set the horse at a gallop and dashed down the steep slope to join up with Shique and the others.

Thanks to their assault and to the cannon strikes, the enemy's pursuit had somewhat slowed down. For now, they could only rush at a gallop. The fast-moving riders protecting the wounded Bouwen at their centre were not even fifty strong. The others had been taken down during the pincer attack by Greygun and Garda's armies, had been too slow to escape or had scattered and escaped elsewhere.

Less than half an hour later, the Taúlian soldiers tasted the true flavour of despair.

Although behind them was a cloud of dust kicked up by a group of enemies, they halted their steps. Flames were rising up from the direction of Helio.

"They were attacked," from atop his horse, Duncan's clenched fists shook. "Those bastards, they've seized Helio."

At the same time as Greygun's army made its move, the Red Hawk unit that had been left in the city must have set fire to the palace. Everything had gone according to the enemy's plan. It was as though their path had been torn to pieces before their very eyes.

Duncan glanced towards Bouwen; his face was nearly chalk white and he was about to lose consciousness. At this rate they were racing headlong towards the enemy and furthermore, they had pursuers at their back; even a valiant and uninjured warrior would not be able to make his way back to Taúlia.

Duncan seemed to think about something, then called thirty of the regular soldiers to gather around him. Not long after, he also beckoned Orba to him.

"Several kilometres north of Helio, there's a bridge. Take the general, cross the river and head towards the Belgana Summits. After that, hide yourselves and wait for an opportunity."

"What will you do, Captain?"

"It's called being the rear guard. All the regular soldiers will defend it to the last," said Duncan . Rear guard or whatever, if the regular soldiers stayed behind here, those that were left were almost all mercenaries. It was saying that Bouwen alone was considered to be the 'main force' and that he was entrusting him to Orba and the others.

"Why are you saying this to me?"

"Why indeed. You're quick-witted and seem trustworthy. And besides," Duncan's eyes crinkled as he smiled, "you drove away that Adelber that I couldn't stand."

"You're a fool. I might sell Bouwen to Greygun for the high reward."

"And when you do, my ghost will seize you by the throat." From Duncan's voice, it was impossible to tell if he was joking or serious. "Anyway, as things are now, all we can do is wait to be annihilated. Mercenaries aren't suited to act as the rear guard so all I can do is to take a chance on you."

Next to Duncan there was also the platoon leader Rouno. He too seemed to have determined that this was a fitting place to die.

Stars had begun to be scattered across the sky. After taking a moment to look up at them,

"Hurry!" was all Duncan said as he turned his horse's head back to the direction they had come from. The thirty regular Taúlian soldiers did the same. Duncan held the position of captain of the mercenary unit, but such was his calibre that it was rumoured he would sooner or later be given the command of an army corps. Nor did the faces of the soldiers who accompanied him show any hesitation.

They didn't know how many soldiers were pursuing them but naturally, no one believed that they would be held in check by thirty men. The cloud of dust rose before them.

Then, I too...

It was the image of a hero that Orba had idealised in his childhood. ‘I cannot watch a companion die without doing anything, I too will stay here.’ Prepared to face of death as an overwhelming number of enemies closed in on them yet finding a means of escape at the last minute thanks to miraculous ingenuity and insight, and through sword skills that no ordinary person could compare with – he had longed to be the protagonist in that kind of tale.

But here and now, there wasn't a single plan he could prepare, and Orba wasn't a superhuman who could mow down enemies who outnumbered them ten times over and who were noisily descending upon them.

At that moment, Shique drew his horse up to his.

"Let's go, Orba," his face that was daubed with his victims' blood seemed the same as usual.

"Yeah," said Gilliam, likewise drawing his horse to theirs. "This is an honourable duty that can only be performed by Taúlian soldiers. We can't lend a hand."

"Stan, take the lead and let's get out of here fast," Talcott yelled while looking in horror in their enemies' direction. "Stan will find a safe route. Right?"

"If you depend on me, I'll be bothered by it."

"You're supposed to say 'Absolutely, leave it to me'. This is why you're an idiot, an idiot."

Orba looked towards the backs of Duncan and his group.

An honourable duty...

"Shit!" He spat out through the mask then he and Shique placed themselves on either side of Bouwen's horse and broke into a gallop, propping him up between them.

A long, long night began.

Two fell along the way. Their wounds were deep and they were unable to endure the march on horseback.

The first one fell from his horse as he died. Gilliam got down from his own horse and took the soldier's emergency rations and water canteen. They couldn't afford to mourn the dead. Instead, they hid them somewhere inconspicuous so that their pursuers would not spot them.

The second one dismounted by himself.

"I can't carry on. Go on ahead – Don't worry, I won't make the mistake of being found by the enemy."

The middle-aged mercenary was in agony. They couldn't take food and water from a dying man, but it was obvious that he would be dead before long. Even so, there was nothing that Orba could do.

Gilliam and Stan pulled the two horses. For the soldiers who no longer had anything, the horses were valuable. They might be able to sell them for a good price in some village or, if it came to it, eat them as food.

The bitter truth was that they were the remnants of a defeated army. Orba was exhausted. In terms of physical condition only, he had been brought lower than this before. But his spirit was utterly exhausted. The heroes of legends could demonstrate their virtue and chivalrous spirit because they were in good health and didn't have to deal with situations like being pursued, or not knowing where to get fresh food and water, or being worried about someone else.

Those remaining were Orba, Shique, Gilliam, Talcott and Stan as well as Kurun. There were only two regular soldiers and they were so exhausted that they couldn't speak. Bouwen was in the same state, and if hadn't been for the faint heaving of his back, they might have thought that he had died.

They fled on without lighting torches, without looking back.

It reminded Orba of that time in his childhood when he had been forced to flee from his native village. He had been terrified from the dread of not knowing where Garberan soldiers might appear from as he pulled his mother by the hand during their journey by night.

It's the same as back then.

The darkness shrouding their surroundings wore away at the fugitives' nerves. Before you know it, the darkness is speaking, a voice flickering in your ear. Don't make a sound, don't breathe, behind you – There! – an enemy is drawing near. No, it's from the side. From the front. Instead of this, you want to scream and ride your horse at full speed. You want to break

into a gallop as you wait for certain death without being able to move, while your throat slowly starts to tighten.

That damn Greygun.

As he was now, Orba was remembering a bitterness strong enough to burn up his own body.

If he wanted to accomplish something at all cost, Orba could even throw away his own feelings, but if that purpose was lost, then he couldn't suppress the hot-headed boy, or rather, he couldn't suppress his own emotions. At the Coldrin Hills, his purpose had been to somehow prevent his allies' annihilation. Because of that, he had been able to calmly assess the situation and come up with tactics, but now, his body and mind both exhausted, all that remained was anger, seething in his belly like fire.

In that way, several hours passed without anyone saying a thing.

"Where do you want to go now?"

When the light of dawn had begun to dye the wilderness a bluish-purple, Talcott spoke. Ahead of them was the bridge spanning the river. It was probably that which made them think that there might be some sort of settlement nearby. Shique answered,

"There does seem to be a village nearby, but we can't go looking like this. We should hide in the Belganas then send one or two of us to scout things out."

"You really are stupidly honest. You'd do that for the sake of an employer who can no longer pay us?"

"Are you thinking of selling out Bouwen?" Gilliam asked threateningly. "If you do, you'll be a disgrace among mercenaries. You'll be known far and wide for it and you won't find employment anywhere, or anyone to trust you. I'm going to make my name as a mercenary. There's no way I'd stoop to being a two-bit villain like you."

"Shut up, Jumbo. Where there's life, there's hope. I'm not saying to sell out Bouwen. First comes food, then wine! I'm going to go take looksie for a village."

"But you're injured and anyone can tell at a glance that you're a defeated soldier. We can't afford to be reported to Helio," Shique pointed out.

"Tsk, you Mephians are all the same. If you want to stop me, try it. Even you lot won't get out of it unscathed."

Everyone was in a state of physical and mental collapse. His expression angry, Talcott was like a different person. He looked like he might swing a sword if anyone approached him.

Just as Stan was starting to try and calm him down,

"There's food in the Belganas."

"What?"

Everyone turned their startled eyes towards Kurun. Blood that looked like dirt now that it had gone dry clung to his face, but his gaze as he looked at Orba and the others was unusually direct.

"I'm not sure about wine but I think it can only provide water. Since there's an underground river flowing there." "Oi, newbie who can't even swing a sword properly. Have you finally gone mad?"

"That’s rich coming from you."

"Wha...?"

"Anyway!" Kurun spoke in an unusually loud voice, "I'll guide you. Because I have a request for you."

"A request?"

At Gilliam's question, Kurun nodded. And said something completely out of place for the situation.

"So that he can return as rightful king of Helio, I want you to work for the prince of Helio."

Chapter 5: Lasvius' Unit

Part 1

Lasvius was frustrated.

Speaking of Lasvius, there wasn't a person in Helio who didn't know of the commander of the dragon riders. His many feats of arms had made his name famous not only in his own country but also throughout the four corners of Tauran. As he was a man who had sworn absolute loyalty to Helio's royal family, and even when Helio was being ravaged by civil war, he had stayed within its old castle and he and his men had fought bravely, singlehandedly taking on the might of the rebellion.

In the end however, he disappeared and it was rumoured that he might have died in battle.

That Lasvius.

He was still alive. As well as himself, three hundred of the dragoons who had served King Elargon had hidden themselves in the Belgana Summits.

By one of those jagged peaks that resembled sharp fangs, a wide valley opened to the east and west. Lasvius having discovered it at the end of their flight, they had piled up stones at the valley's entrance as a temporary defensive wall and over fifty of his troops, himself included, now dwelt in the caverns carved out in the cliff face. The remainder had been divided into platoons and, in similar shelters from the elements, awaited their opportunity.

The caves where Lasvius and his group lived had been eroded out of the rock over a very long period of time by water from a narrow tributary branch of a nearby river that flowed through there. Thanks to that, there was at least no shortage of drinking water. The platoons would occasionally come over and draw some. Food however was not so easy to come by.

It had been less than a month since Helio had fallen to hands of rebels. They had carefully rationed out and survived on the food that they had been able to carry with them. When it had run out, they had no choice but to roast and eat their horses and dragons. It was a dishonour for dragon riders. Even so, they had chewed at the meat of their favourite steeds and swallowed it in tears.

If they alone had escaped, they probably would not have been able to endure such a disgrace and would no doubt have resolved to face an honourable death by attempting to retake Helio. Nor had Lasvius ever feared death. However, there was one thing that he had to protect no matter what. The only hope remaining to them: Elargon's fatherless son, Rogier.

It had happened when Lasvius was still upholding the resistance movement within Helio.

As most of the royal palace had already been occupied, it was unclear whether the former king, Hardross, and Prince Rogier were even still alive. Then unexpectedly, several palace handmaidens had reached Lasvius by using the secret passages within the palace, bringing Rogier with them. It seemed they would be able to escape taking only the prince with them.

At that time, Lasvius immediately decided to leave Helio. The prince would only be in danger if they stayed there fighting. First of all, as long as the successor to the crown still lived, nobody, no matter what kind of person they might be, would be able to claim to be the rightful king. In other words, even if a false king, an arrogant usurper were to establish themselves in Helio, they would merely be beings that would inevitably one day be overthrown.

Lasvius escaped from Helio with his subordinates and the prince, and they hid themselves in these caves.

They would without fail return Helio to the hands of the rightful royal family – such was their wish and in order to accomplish it, they were willing to endure any hardship. Even as the soldiers gradually grew thinner and thinner, the gleam in their eyes grew sharper and they gave the impression that their very bodies had become keen-edged blades.

They were like carnivorous animals stalking their prey and awaiting intently for their chance. Cautiously, carefully, he had his men infiltrate Helio and get in contact with those soldiers who had been King Elargon's followers and who were likewise still hidden in Helio.

And then, the perfect opportunity arose. As Garda's army had departed from Eimen, a large military contingent set off from Helio. Some wanted to attack immediately, but Lasvius remained cautious. If they retook the city while the troops were on the march, those blades would turn back and Helio would once more be plunged into civil war.

To make their move, they needed to wait until the troops clashed with Garda's army. Therefore, while the troops were on the march, he had increased the number of his people acting in secret within the city.

Even so – the fortunes of war were not with us.

It was a mistake.

As the battle between Garda's army and Helio began, just as Lasvius' group was finally about to make its move, Helio suddenly fell. Moreover, Helio's troops were routed at the battle at the Coldrin Hills. All because the mercenary commander Greygun had betrayed them. In order to have their advance unit arrive at Helio half a day later, they had left the hilly area less than two hours before the start of the fight in which Garda's army and Greygun's troops joined forces. Because of his timing, Lasvius had completely lost his chance.

It was said that the false king Jallah was hauled off stark naked and publicly executed.

"Jallah should have been defeated at our hands. That those mercenary scoundrels were the ones to take his head – that more than anything, above anything, is intolerable!"

Lasvius recalled what the soldiers who had returned from Helio with that report had howled in frustration, their cheeks awash with tears.

"Marilène, that-that witch! She's definitely tied to Cherik. Greygun wasn't driven out by the king of Cherik because they'd fallen out. He was following the king's scheme from the start and came over to our Helio pretending to have been kicked out. The queen knew it and invited in that base, vulgar hawk!"

The proof of this was that now that the name of Helio's ruler had changed again in such a short time, Cherik had suddenly moved its troops. Not to bring relief to Helio. They had taken up position along the border with Taúlia. Having been forced to hurriedly make preparations to intercept them, Taúlia was unable to send reinforcements to Helio. This of course was Cherik's aim. Even though they didn't appear to be going to immediately assail Taúlia, they still hadn't pulled up camp.

Now, when Helio was falling, Taúlia could not easily move its army. Because be it Helio or Cherik, whichever route they chose, there was a high chance that they would be caught in a pincer attack.

If they make a bad move, they'll end up in a deadlock.

Lasvius grew more and more frustrated. They could only wait patiently for the next opportunity. However, given his unit's situation, would they be able to last another two or three weeks? If their identities were suspected by the nearby nomadic herders that they had sold their weapons to and bought food from, there might by someone among them who would run to Helio to inform on them. Garda's army was currently invincible and there would surely be many people who hoped to survive by forging a link with it.

But I'm different, thought Lasvius. Since the rightful king was nearby, he knew neither hunger nor fatigue. No, even if he felt them, even if he were on the verge of death, he wouldn't consider his own self-protection. That was the kind of man he was.

His men were the same. That very day, Lasvius had gone around all the places were his men were staying, starting with the caves, and as expected, the soldiers' faces were strongly marked with discouragement and weariness. Nevertheless, there was still some strength left. Lasvius had the personality befitting of a general and he shared a bond of steel with them.

However,

At present, there was an atmosphere of unrest in the cave. As he went towards the slime-covered cliff face, there was the main culprit. Seeing none other than Rogier talking to him, a crease appeared at the bridge of Lasvius' nose.

That man wore a mask.

The day before yesterday, Lasvius had received a report,

"Kurun has returned."

When he had heard the name Kurun, he had not immediately been able to remember him, but when he saw his face, he recognised the man as an apprentice dragoon. When Jallah had only just seized the throne, as vigilance was still weak, he had sent several people as mercenaries to Taúlia in order to gather information. Kurun was one of them.

Kurun had taken part in the battle at the Coldrin Hills. He had witnessed Greygun's treachery at first hand and it seemed that he had barely managed to escape alive. Angry and frustrated, the apprentice soldier had told his tale in tears. Lasvius appreciated his efforts, but Kurun wasn't alone; he had brought with him the Taúlian general, Bouwen, as well as several mercenaries. Among them, there was a swordsman who wore a mask and whose background was unknown, but according to Kurun, he was nothing short of a master.

"I think he will definitely be useful when we retake Helio."

As Bouwen had lost consciousness, Lasvius had made sure he was given medical treatment. They had no surplus supplies, but he was still a Taúlian commander. One way or another, he expected that he would come in useful.

Three of the mercenaries however were Mephians. Like all Zerdians, he hated Mephius. He and his father had taken part in the war against them more than ten years ago, and his father had lost his life in a surprise attack by Mephian forces.

Nevertheless, Lasvius made sure that his men didn't start a fight with them. They were deeply affected by the ugliness and futility of the internal strife in Helio. Their physical and mental endurance were reaching their limits, the only thing sustaining them was the thought of retaking their city. But turning that around, it meant that those who did not share that thought,

even if they were allies, were nuisances who disturbed the bond.

But if we drive them out, they know about this place...

If it came to it, he would find some pretext to kill them. As far as Lasvius was concerned, there was no righteousness comparable to ensuring that Rogier would be the next king of Helio, and for that purpose, he was prepared to stain himself with any kind of disgrace.

A short while earlier.

Still wearing his mask, Orba, his back to the cliff face, was sharpening his sword. Shique returned to his side.

"How is he?"

"Still feverish. Aside from the wound to his shoulder, he also took a bullet to the back. His armour prevented it from reaching any internal organs but the bullet bit into his torn flesh."

Bouwen still hadn't regained consciousness. "I see," Orba replied as his polished blade reflected his own face.

Thanks to the river flowing through the caves, they could drink water to their heart's content, but they hadn't had a proper meal these past two or three days. Hunger gave rise to impatience and irritation. Every day the quick-tempered Talcott and Gilliam would almost cause trouble with Helio's dragoons, and every time they would be stopped by Stan and Shique.

Not only for Orba and the others but also for the dragon riders, feelings were growing more and more violent. As there was practically nothing to do except wait for an opportunity, every day they would sit in a circle and pile abuse on Greygun and Cherik. Taken together, the brunt of their hatred was aimed at Helio's queen, Marilène.

Once Greygun had become king of Helio, he had shamelessly desired Marilène to be queen again. And once again, Marilène had immediately agreed.

"Still, Helio's calamities are unending," Shique said with a sigh. He too was exhausted. "The king is killed in battle, and who would have thought there'd be a rebellion, then the mercenary commander they invited in turned traitor. And during that time, the ones who suffer the most are the powerless people. The violence of the Red Hawks is bad enough by itself, but Garda's army has taken people hostage and it's said they will be using them as sacrifices..."

It was said that on the day it fell, Helio was the scene of atrocities. Apparently all around, the mercenaries had broken into stores and houses, each intent on plundering even the tiniest bit more money and goods than his companions. Those who opposed them were mercilessly cut

down and there was not a single street in which the screams of women could not be heard.

They might still have been continuing even now if not for the fact that on the day he became king, Greygun had considerably restrained them.

Now that he was no longer a mercenary commander but a king, it could be said that Greygun was going to maintain some kind sense and reason. Still, as to whether Helio was a country in which one could live as healthy a life as before, the answer was most definitely no.

"Apparently several of the high priests directly serving Garda have entered the court and demand several dozen sacrifices a day. On the king's orders, night after night the soldiers appear in the town to choose who among the people will be sacrificed and to carry them away. If their families cling to them and scream to try and stop them, they immediately heft them onto their shoulders and take them too."

"Enough."

"I hope Kay and Niels are safe. Since they'll have been marked down by the Red Hawks..."

"I said 'enough'. Stop it!" Orba suddenly barked out angrily. Shique looked surprised, but he kept his mouth shut as he watched Orba polishing his blade with all his might.

The anger that had accumulated in Orba's belly during their flight had become viscous and clung to his innards, not leaving him. His blood boiled as he couldn't stand the thought of how that traitor Greygun had become king and still remained in Helio.

Now it's personal.

When he had been a body-double, Orba had been fond of tricky schemes, so the fact that he had been beaten by such a scheme stocked the fire of his hatred. He felt like immediately galloping off to Helio and marching into the castle alone.

"Is that the sword that you bombarded Moldorf with strokes from?"

A young voice asked. The boy who was approaching him was Elargon's only son, Rogier. There were several people with him who appeared to be acting as attendants, and it was clear from their expressions that they did not want Rogier going near the likes of a mercenary, but the boy's freckled face was alight with curiosity as he peered at the sword in Orba's hand. He was still only nine years old.

"It's said that Kadyne's Red Dragon is a commander equal to Lasvius. Are you stronger than Lasvius?"

Not even royalty was getting enough nutrition here, his sunken cheeks were slightly smeared

with soil, and his eyes alone were shinning.

"Well, I don't know," as it was, Orba couldn't ignore him and placed his sword on the ground. "Besides, I didn't win against Moldorf. Even when I thrust a spear at him from the front, I couldn't hit him at all. And I think I broke a bone breaking through to him in single combat."

"Of course. Moldorf is said to be without peer on horseback," fittingly for a boy from the royal family, he seemed to enjoy stories about battles. Rogier continued with an air of conviction, "it's said that the first thing every country's strategists think of is how to drag Moldorf from his horse. Should they should shoot at him with bullets and arrows, or should they maybe threaten his horse by bringing a large dragon up to it."

"How about giving it an attractive mare?"

Shique was so startled at Orba's words that he opened his eyes wide. Orba wasn't teasing, he just didn't care about the conversation. Naturally, the faces of the attendants behind the prince grew grim, however,

"If Moldorf's horse forgets the battle and pounces on it, having gotten ready to fight as one with that horse, Moldorf might not be able to adjust his mental state."

"That might be a plan," Rogier was enjoying Orba's unexpected answer, "but an attractive horse... how could humans tell what a horse thinks is beautiful or ugly..."

"A friend of mine has a gift for hearing the 'voice' of dragons. Maybe there's also someone who can evaluate a horse's beauty or ugliness..."

"You talk exactly like royalty or nobility," Lasvius had approached them. Having received only a single glance from him, Orba didn't give any greeting either.

The general's face was in the same state as that of the other soldiers, but even though he was haggard, the physique beneath his armour remained impressive. He was thirty-five years old. Perhaps because he had grown thin, or perhaps because he had a month's worth of hatred and resentment stocked up, his always slanted eyes now seemed to slant even further and his glare had become truly terrifying.

Orba however was perfectly composed,

"It's the opposite. Because I don't know any royals or nobles, I don't understand the proper way to speak. My apologies if I was rude in any way."

"You…"

Even now, Helio's general was fearsome, and those around them held their breath. Then,

"Lasvius," Rogier interposed. He explained Orba's 'clever scheme' and asked whether among the subordinates, there was one who was thoroughly knowledgeable about horses. Lasvius gave a strained smile,

"I will have one searched for. Now then, Your Highness, it's time for your studies. This way, please."

"A bright and cheerful child," commented Shique. "That brightness is very much what is saving those around him. If he lives and retakes Helio, he will probably be a good king."

"Probably."

"Still, that child is more adult-like than you. Seeing you snap at everyone feels just like back in the old days."

"Shut up," Orba looked sullen and turned away.

Naturally, not even he expected to gain anything from being rude towards Lasvius. However, his frustration and hatred were equal to Lasvius' own. When they were escaping in fear of the shadow of their enemies, he had remembered the time in his childhood when he had been forced to flee from his native village.

Shit! Had he not picked up a sword so that would never happen again, so that nothing more could be taken from him?

I'll have his head.

He would not be able to rest until he looked down at Greygun's provoking face, his feet planted on either side of it.

"Just like back in the old days," just as Shique had pointed out. He was going back to being the lone swordsman who guarded only his own life and dignity with his sword.

Part 2

"Move, move!"

Men clad in red armour were walking along the main streets of Helio. Although they weren't being chased away by especially loud voices, the people had almost all disappeared and the Red Hawks mercenaries haughtily swaggered on.

On the day Helio fell, they had been the ones to lay waste to the city. They had gone into every private house hunting for Helio's regular soldiers who were being sheltered there, but their purpose didn't stop there. The soldiers has snatched everything that caught their eye, had dragged young girls into the open alleyways, had killed any man who opposed them and had wrecked entire houses.

And so the people locked their doors and hid so as not the catch the mercenaries' eye. Only one elderly person watched the soldiers from a second-floor window of a merchant's house, but when they saw that the soldiers were pulling old-fashioned cannons in their midst, they drew back from the window, trembling fearfully, tightly clutching their frightened grandchildren.

The Red Hawks mercenaries were headed towards the Dragon Gods temple.

As could be expected, only men who acknowledged Garda as the high priest of the Dragon Gods were awarded positions as leaders and Garda's army had not once attacked a temple or a shrine. But there was a rumour that Helio's soldiers were hidden within it. The previous day, mercenaries from the Red Hawks had intruded in on it to perform a search, but the priests had driven them out, saying,

"Those bearing swords cannot enter. Besides, today a messenger from Garda is here."

Not so long ago, fear of strife with Garda's army would have made the mercenaries withdraw, but now they had an awareness that Helio was theirs. Drinking and rioting until morning had spurred their hatred.

Then one of them started to talk big.

"Garda's army is just a collection of troops from different countries. They can't stand up to us who are united in ruling one country."

"Right, if they fight back, we'll chase them out of the city," an artillery captain named Wadim added fervently. And so it had turned into a march in which they pulled out guns. Their

purpose was of course to flush out Helio's soldiers, but it seemed that the means had already turned into the end. As though to satisfy their childish desire for revenge, they positioned their guns before the temple.

Wadim was himself a Zerdian but through long association with foreigners in the course of his life as a mercenary, his awe and piety towards the Dragon Gods had completely faded away. There had been from the start a great number of ruffians with guilty consciousness among the Red Hawks. As they now ruled a country, their state of mind was naturally that of men who feared not even the gods.

They began ostentatiously heating the iron cannon balls in front of the temple. It was a declaration of their intention to fire them one by one. Not surprisingly, the priests within the temple turned pale but,

"Please wait."

An unexpected person appeared.

Marilène. Just as for the Zerdian queens of yore, her handmaidens were holding the long, trailing veil that adorned her head. Marilène liked dressing up in this way when she went out during the day. It was a way of showing her own power.

"Well met, our lady queen," Wadim bowed in a fairly courteous manner. However, there was no trace of reverence in the stealthy glance he stole of the queen's sensual figure.

He gave a faint, fleeting sneer,

A woman who'll switch from one man to another to protect her life and her position.

It would have been one thing had it have stopped at scorn, but Marilène now drew the people of Helio's hatred even more than she had before. The queen was the only one who had managed to maintain the same political power as before Greygun became king. Most of the soldiers and nobles who had opposed the Red Hawks' insurrection had been killed, and those who were still alive had all been arrested. It was said that they were treated like animals.

Marilène was the one who ushered in Greygun and Garda's army.

That rumour was repeated as though it were the truth and it seemed that now, for the people, Marilène was seen as more deserving of their hatred than even Greygun or Garda.

Even Wadim and his ilk referred to her simply as 'the boss' woman'. But for all that, they didn't fear her in the slightest. However,

"Kindly take yourselves away at once," she said slightingly. She gave an aloof tilt of her chin

and gazed coldly at Wadim. Her way of talking was exactly as though she were requesting that pebbles be removed from her path as they were obstructing her walk.

Wadim's face turned red.

"I-I do not believe that I will be able to take our lady queen's words into account. King Greygun has ordered that we capture every last one of Helio's soldiers. If you protect those who object to our search, then no matter how much you may be the queen..."

"And what did you mean to say by 'no matter how much I may be the queen'?" Wadim remained silent. Although he was a good head taller than the queen, he felt as though he was being looked down upon from an immensely high place. "I frequently come by here. If the priests and priestesses were sheltering soldiers, I would have noticed. However I have not seen any soldiers here, yourselves excepted."

"B-But..."

At that, the queen brought the back of her hand to her lips and gave a high-pitched laugh.

"But how very excessive of you to come to such a place pulling cannons and wearing full armour. There are none here who carry swords or spears. Who on earth within the Dragon Gods faith could possibly injure you?"

As she said that, Wadim and the others who had come ready and fully armed now felt like they were childishly storming a playground, and the former dignity of their full armour was now nothing but an embarrassment to them.

Sh-Shit!

Although no one other than Marilène was laughing, Wadim felt as though the people of Helio were peeping out from every nook and cranny, and that their faces all wore scornful smiles.

"T-This," even so, Wadim gave Marilène his best glare and said, "I have no choice but to report this to the king." "Do as you please. Now then, have you done with your business? If so, you should leave."

Marilène's expression didn't change in the slightest. Her plump lips still curved into a smile and she entered the temple before Wadim's eyes.

It was not long since the sun had sunk over the horizon.

After she had taken a bath and as her handmaidens were combing out her hair, the clatter of Greygun's violent footsteps was heard approaching Marilène's room. As Marilène had not yet

finished getting ready, there was a slight altercation at the door but as there was currently no one who could oppose Greygun, it was roughly flung open.

As Greygun advanced with long strides, it was as though a wild beast had been smuggled into the Court. However,

"Well, my dear lord," Marilène called out with the same cool smile she had shown Wadim. She had called him this since the day of her becoming Greygun's wife had first drawn near. Neither her voice nor her expression were those of a woman who had been toyed with by fate and hurled into cruel misfortune. Instead she gave the impression of having grown used to dealing with men who sought to obtain her.

Perhaps because of that, it stocked the fire of Greygun's anger.

"It seems you got in the soldiers' way," Helio's new king hurled out angrily.

The handmaidens silently shrank back. It was no wonder. What Greygun had done on the day he was proclaimed king was known throughout Helio. At daybreak, he had summoned the captive nobles to his presence and had them swear loyalty to himself.

He beheaded those who refused.

"Disloyal," he had called them.

He also beheaded those who pledged their loyalty.

"Those who easily switch allegiance aren't worthy of trust," he had smiled.

Even his barred teeth were stained with the blood that had spurted from his victims. Tens of corpses rolled at Greygun's feet, and it was said that they had been left where they were during the feast for his coronation.

Marilène had her handmaidens, who had quite lost their voices from fear, withdraw from her room.

"It was the temple that the sorcerer from Garda's army was visiting. If even a single soldier lay concealed there, he would have been noticed immediately and long since been captured. Was that not rather a fool's errand?"

She spoke as though completely indifferent to Greygun's anger. Naturally, Greygun was fully aware of what she had pointed out. Furthermore, if the soldiers had attacked the temple and caused him to incur the displeasure of Garda's army, it would be awkward for him. He was aware that Marilène's actions had safeguarded his own position.

Whispered slander and malicious gossip notwithstanding, Marilène was a queen of noble lineage. To make such a queen his wife, Greygun had worked his utmost to become a 'king', but it was difficult for he who had come from the lowest social layer to rid himself of his inferiority complex. Marilène had understood that and in her outward behaviour towards him, she always raised him up to the standing of a 'king', such as how she had just now called to him 'my dear lord'. And yet, it was irritating. *It appears that someone like you can't even stop your own soldiers from acting according as they please* – how long would it be before she openly spoke her scorn? "This is my country. I will take charge of everything."

"Would you say the same thing to the sorcerer, Garda?"

"What?"

An enigmatic smile broke over Marilène's face. Greygun's eyes blazed.

Is this vixen reading my thoughts?

In truth, Greygun had trouble dealing with the sorcerers who called themselves Garda's direct subordinates. These were the men who handed down direct orders to Moldorf and the other officers. No sooner had their forces entered Helio than they demanded a hundred sacrifices. And thus they announced that from here on, once every two days, he would offer up ten young men and women. At first, Greygun had thought it was a joke. If a tiny city-state was to do that, it would very soon perish. But when he received the sorcerers' icy glares from beneath their hoods, it felt like his own body temperature dropped.

Besides which, it was said that new troops from Eimen would soon be sent to Helio as reinforcements for Garda's army. If their numbers increased, then no matter how much he might call himself 'king', Greygun didn't think that he would be able to control them.

The kingdom that Greygun had finally obtained after being born on a battlefield and having gone through countless battles was already giving off the stench of death and ruin.

Swallowing these various thoughts, Greygun put force into his voice,

"Anyway, don't just act as you please from now on."

"Even so," Marilène laughed in her rich voice, "As there is already a rumour that you, my dear lord, are being henpecked by the queen, your position can't be said that be that of an imposing king..."

Her chin was suddenly jerked upwards and Marilène stopped talking.

Greygun's glaring eyes were right next to hers. And yet, her smile was unperturbed.

The eyes that scorned him were like those of a witch and like those of a young girl's.

After her chin, Greygun seized Marilène's arm and forcibly made her stand, then threw her down on the canopied bed.

Then immediately was on top of her.

"Don't say anything more," he sealed her lips. Holding her down, he wished to waste no time in confirming that Marilène was entirely his. The woman who had three times been queen did not fight him. But Greygun couldn't help but feel her icy, scornful gaze as she allowed him to stroke her skin.

Part 3

Bouwen regained consciousness on the fourth day after Orba's group had joined with Lasvius'.

He had wept where he lay when he heard that Duncan and the others had made a stand and prepared to fight to the death in order to allow him to escape.

That very evening, a war council was held in a secluded part of the cavern and for some reason, Orba was summoned to it.

"I heard from Kurun. About how you displayed quick-wits during the retreat from the Coldrins. If you have any scheme for turning things around, speak."

It was something that had long been true for the man called Orba that if there were people that he felt he couldn't stomach, many among those people would also find Orba disagreeable and hateful. Lasvius was another such. Orba had originally known little about Helio's circumstances. But now anger against Greygun was smouldering in his chest and he advocated gathering the best men and having them infiltrate Helio to kill him.

"Quite the hero," Lasvius sneered, "but if we do as you say and the operation fails, our survival will be suspected and we'll be destroyed. It seems you're a little overrated."

"What?"

Blood rushed to Orba's his head and Shique, who had gone with him, had to calm him down.

Naturally Lasvius wasn't simply bidding for time. Via his men who had snuck into the city since before the battle at the Coldrin Hills, he was making arrangements for an uprising to be staged within Helio. Things such as where the captured soldiers were being held and how they were being guarded had been thoroughly investigated, and once they had been rescued, they would aim for Greygun.

But the two thousand of Garda's troops stationed there were a problem. First of all, they would need to move those troops out of Helio.

"When the time comes," Lasvius said while looking sharply at a map of Helio's surroundings, "we will launch a full surprise attack on Helio and we should be able to draw out the enemy."

His subordinates nodded, their faces grim and resolved.

Ha, Orba scoffed.

Considering the scale of the enemy numbers, making a surprise attack and luring them out with just three hundred soldiers wasn't worth much. Say they succeeded in retaking Helio, would they be able to defend it against an attack from Garda's army?

Realising that any moment now Orba was going to open his mouth to say something sarcastic, Shique had to struggle to hold him in check.

"Don't be childish," Shique said after the war council was over. The nearby Gilliam shrugged,

"Why say that at this point in time? He's always been a brat."

"No, back when he was prince, he still had a clear head. Whereas the problem with you is that your limbs are just too strong."

"My limbs?"

"You first start by thoughtlessly sorting things out through brute strength. Unless your hands and feet are bound, not once will you use your head to think."

Still seething with anger, Orba ignored them.

"What Lasvius said is reasonable. If we attack Greygun from the shadows at this point, Garda's forces won't care. Regardless of how he got the throne or what he is doing now that he has it, Greygun is currently king. If Helio loses its king again, it will be at the mercy of Garda's army. And if that happens, every last person in the city will be as good as already sacrificed."

"Where are you going, Orba?"

Gilliam asked as Orba suddenly stood up. "Nowhere," he answered and walked out of the cavern. Hunger had made Gilliam irritable. Orba's brusque attitude was about to make him sullenly stand up when,

"Wa-Wait."

"What? You always take his side you bastard, but this time..."

"Didn't you see his face just now? He's thinking of something. At times like these, don't Orba's eyes truly make you shiver?"

Even he was asked, Gilliam could hardly sympathise. But anyhow, he realised that fighting was a waste of energy and lowered himself back down again.

As for Orba,

"Don't go too far," while acknowledging the warning from the soldier on guard duty, he walked beneath the night sky.

A king?

It was as Shique said. If he cut down Greygun who had become king, other than satisfying his current desire for revenge, it would lead to nothing.

Lead to nothing... For who would it lead to nothing?

He had lost his position as prince, so for who on earth did he need to hesitate for, he wondered. But Orba now remembered the time when they passed through the gate on the way to fight.

It had been a proud scene for the soldiers, that moment when they were being seen off by the people. But it had had nothing to do with Orba himself. Helio not being his hometown, he had almost no acquaintances there. Still, among all those there, there had been two faces, those of Kay and Niels... Their eyes had been following him until he was out of sight.

The soldier seen off by his family or lover holds on to that instant as he goes to face death.

It might have been the same for Roan. Perhaps being seen off by the large crowd of villagers – including Orba himself, their mother and Alice – had made him feel just a little proud. Had he thought to himself that he would protect them?

Orba had stopped walking without realising it and stared up defiantly at the night sky. His anger hadn't cooled down. Quite the opposite, it had reached boiling point. But it wasn't his personal feelings towards Greygun. Greygun had betrayed and killed soldiers who had left with the same expression as Roan had, with the same pride at going to protect their city and families.

Garda was plunging the entire west into fear. Following the same path as Alice and his mother, the people were merely being toyed with by power and violence.

He could now understand why he had flared up in anger when Shique had informed him about Helio's current situation.

It hadn't only been anger against Greygun. More than anything, Orba was angry at himself.

Why hadn't he been able to see through Greygun's betrayal? He should have foreseen that there might have been a trap. If he had been able to show that it was through definite words or

actions, something like that might not have happened.

Ever since defeating Oubary, he had been listless about everything and that Helio - that Kay and Niels might have landed in a fix because of it was something that he had regretted without realising it.

Tsk.

Naturally he didn't believe that he could have turned around that battle at the Coldrins simply through his own conclusions.

He had experience of a number of battlegrounds. That Helio had been forced to rely on a man like Greygun, that Garda's mysterious army was being allowed to run rampant meant that darkness had taken root in the very world of western Tauran.

Betrayal and strife.

As the west was now, that chain continued on. Although those from the same origin were gathered here, all they did was fight in this wide land.

Tauran has no king.

Ax Bazgan insisted that he himself was by blood the successor to the former Zer Tauran. But it was not thought that Taúlia currently had the strength needed to unify the whole land. And so the various powers all believed that they had a chance of becoming king and continued to fight. The mysterious Garda had taken advantage of that...

"Yeah."

Unexpectedly hearing someone speak, Orba strained his ears. It seemed that the soldiers who had gone out to keep watch were on their way back. So as not to be disturbed while he was thinking, he concealed himself off to one side.

Orba hadn't intended to listen in on their conversation, but as he heard it, he went pale under his mask.

It appeared that Lasvius' group had summoned those from within the nomadic herders who conducted transactions with the outside for the next day and where intending to exchange weapons and food. But in order to prevent their identities and hiding place from leaking out, Lasvius planned to attack them once they had received the food.

The pride of dragoons is great indeed, Orba snickered beneath his mask. Lasvius was someone he couldn't stomach and now that his intuition had been vindicated, he could loathe him to his heart's content.

Orba blinked suddenly and started to indulge in a different thought.

Orba could feel something welling up within him. It no longer had anything to do with his personal feelings for Lasvius.

It wasn't a change that he himself was conscious of, but as he looked up at the sky, Orba's eyes were the same as when he had worn the 'mask' of Gil Mephius.

Late that night.

News had reached Lasvius from an ally who was keeping watch on Helio. It was not good news.

"Reinforcements for Garda's forces?"

The report stated that reinforcements a thousand strong would soon arrive from Eimen. They were just waiting for a further five hundred rear-guard troops to arrive at Eimen. According to estimates, it would be in about a week's time.

One thousand in reinforcements.

They had probably brought them to invade Taúlia. Even though he guessed that there would be more opportunities for moving his unit than during the deadlock, the increased numbers would no doubt also mean tighter defences in Helio.

Feeling increasingly driven into a corner, Lasvius ground his teeth.

In Taúlia was southeast of Helio. News of the defeat at the Coldrin Hills and of the fall of Helio had of course reached there as well.

"Father !" Upon hearing of it, Esmena had come flying out of the chambers in which she had locked herself and was clinging to her father Ax. "Is Bouwen... What happened to Bouwen?"

"He's not the kind of man to kick the bucket that easily. Now calm down in case those attacks of yours flare up again."

Despite his remonstrations to his daughter, Ax Bazgan's own thoughts were anything but calm.

Damn Cherik, joining forces with that sorcerer.

At about the halfway point between Taúlia and Cherik, an encampment of seven hundred of the latter's army stretched out. As they were right at their border, they couldn't make any

careless moves.

"If it comes to that, it will be a short and decisive battle. Can we tear all the way to Cherik in one go?"

"We could do that, however..." Ravan Dol had not relaxed his cautious stance. Indeed, it was because he had foreseen the possibility of Cherik joining forces with Garda that he had until now being urging his lord to act prudently. "If the enemy withdraws into the town and holds siege, unless we have our entire army, it will cost us time. Taúlia would be completely empty and if Garda's army make their move from Helio at that time, it will fall."

"Don't answer so seriously and do you take me for a fool? I was just caught up in the mood."

"Hmm, no wonder since it's you, my lord."

And here I thought that he'd actually had a good idea... He added the second half in an inaudible voice.

"What?" Ax said irritably. Without his war fan, he was unable to calm down. "If you want to say something, say it. I hear you've sent out a number of spies so do you have a plan? At this rate, we're going to be encircled by every power in Tauran."

"Leave it to me. My lord, you most uphold appearances and calmly remain the lord that the people and soldiers rely on."

"Remain calm," said Ax, half in despair. It was of course not in his nature to helplessly wait for ruin. Be it soldiers, dragons or bullets, his preparations were flawless and he had purchased a large new air carrier equipped for handling major combat. Although their existence hadn't been made public, he had hired a number of people skilled at handling ships. When the time came, he would have soldiers loaded into the new ship to attack the enemy from behind.

Taúlia was tense with the strain of constantly wondering if war was finally at hand.

"They weren't able to finish Bouwen off?"

A man asked upon hearing that there were no reports from the battlefield about that one person.

Raswan Bazgan.

"Well, fine. All he can do now is a die a dog's death in the wilds he escaped to. All according to plan. Next is to not make any mistakes with the preparations here," he muttered, turning his dark eyes to what was outside the window.

Several years ago, there had been a skirmish with a clan of nomads living in Taúlia and, without his uncle's permission, he had captured and slaughtered about thirty of them within their own territory. Raswan had been in command during that fight, but as his numerous services had otherwise been distinguished, Ax had given him a severe reprimand then forgotten all about it. Despite the appearance of merit, there were no women within the castle to lavish praise on him as his dark eyes seemed to say that he had not carried that massacre out against his will but had done so calmly, on a whim.

And so, while the matter of the candidates to be Taúlia's next successor had yet to be settled, there were very few voices raised in favour of Raswan.

"Our numbers are increasing. Next will be our turn. Whatever you do, don't make any mistakes."

"No."

The voice that responded to Raswan’s mutter was like the threatening hiss of a snake.

Part 4

It's unavoidable, Lasvius was filled with a grim determination, *when they clash with Taúlia, that's when we'll make our move*.

A repeat of the Coldrins was not something he felt he could accept. That time, he wasn't intending to move before receiving detailed reports of the battle situation. And as a result, Greygun's insurrection had occurred and they missed their chance. Although certainly, as Lasvius had not seen through the situation, had they have moved recklessly, there was the fear that they would have been annihilated.

Better that than to wait until it is too late and be driven into a corner from which we can't escape. Better to fight and risk death than to die slowly, starved and weakened.

Lasvius was not loath to die if it were for a just cause. But to starve with their bones exposed to nothing but depressing cliff walls on all sides was not to be contemplated.

We might as well die leaving our names behind.

That would be the best for defeated soldiers. Lasvius smoothly stroked his skin. Even in this situation, he still conscientiously shaved every day using a knife. Not because he was fastidious. Not only his slanted eyes but his facial features were strangely sharp. His face was slender and his nose and lips were thin, giving it an angular impression. Lasvius hated that his face tended to look feminine. Therefore in the past, he had grown an impressive beard and flaunted his masculinity. Shaving it off had been a sort of vow to himself. Until Rogier was placed upon the throne of Helio, he would endure the disgrace and shave his beard.

Even under pain of death, I will not break this oath, Lasvius had been bent on that thought as he had shaved that morning.

Now, when he was finally ready to discuss his resolve with his men, he received a strange report. The group who had left early in the morning to trade with the nomads had returned but had not been able to attack them as Orba had his forced his way into coming along.

"You damn fools," Lasvius eyes narrowed still further as he yelled, "you should have just killed him if he was getting in the way!"

"N-No, that..." Sweat appeared on the soldiers' brows as they justified themselves. Ostensibly, Orba and the others hadn't done anything and had simply accompanied them to watch. "He brought Lord Rogier with him, we couldn't kill the nomads in front of the prince!"

Whatever his intention had been, Orba had apparently placed the prince onto a horse. And afterwards he had been in deep conversation with the nomads about something.

"What were Lord Rogier's attendants doing! If they're not careful, the prince might be kidnapped by the mercenaries!"

"We wouldn’t' do that."

That voice seemed to reverberate throughout the cave and when he turned around, there was the masked man. For a moment, Lasvius seemed about to give in to emotion but held himself in check.

"We are not a bunch of self-serving mercenaries who only act to suit themselves. I'd appreciate it if you would refrain from behaviour that disrupts discipline."

"How long can you maintain discipline like that," Orba said, completely unconcerned by Lasvius' scowl. "If you order your men to attack treacherously, their mood will just keep getting uglier."

"What!" This time Lasvius shouted in rage. Then his expression was wiped away and he seemed to gulp. Orba completely changed the subject.

"So it seems that reinforcements from Garda's side will be heading to Helio."

"So what? Do you still think that you can march into Helio and strike Greygun down?"

"No," Orba glanced at Lasvius through his mask then looked at the nearby soldiers around whom a dangerous mood was starting to cling. "Call a council of war," he said. Lasvius and the others looked disappointed. "I'll be taking part as the representative for the Taúlian general, Bouwen Tedos. Sir Bouwen has of course given a blood seal."

The place used for the council of war was inside the caves. There were only a few cracks in the roof through which narrow beams of daylight poured down. The various platoon leaders scattered around the base of the mountain, not to mention Lasvius and his close aides, were gathered there. Accordingly, Lasvius started out by talking about his intentions. He had not needed Orba to tell him to summon a council of war as he had from the start intended to do so and to convey his resolution to his men.

The commanders of the small cavalry units shed tears. One day, they would kill the usurper king Jallah and triumphantly return to Helio with Rogier as king - with nothing but that ideal to hold on to, those warriors had been able to endure to their circumstances and surroundings. And then suddenly, Jallah had died and a scoundrel like Greygun had claimed the title of king of Helio and had opened the gates to usher in Garda's army.

This matter was no longer Helio's problem alone. In a week's time, the country would be filled with twice, three times the number of soldiers now stationed in Helio and they would commence their march on Taúlia.

"This is our last chance," said Lasvius, trying to hide the quiver in his voice. "While the enemy is fighting Taúlia, our soldiers on the inside will rise up as one and occupy Helio."

Everyone there listened, deeply impressed by Lasvius' declaration then, one by one, they rose from their seats.

"Let's go."

"We will fight this holy crusade together."

In that moment, the iron bonds that tied Lasvius' unit together stood firm. Emotions that he could not suppress welled within him and, with ardent eyes, he was clasping each in turn by the hand when,

"As expected," one person poured cold water over the proceedings. Orba, the only one still sitting, nodded. "You have resolve."

Humph.

Lasvius felt disdainful of Orba. It seemed to him that despite his earlier stance that "If you order your men to attack treacherously, their mood will just keep getting uglier," he would not be able to do otherwise than to recognise their solidarity. Looking convinced, Orba however said something strange.

"It's just as General Bouwen said."

"Sir Bouwen? What do you mean?"

"The general said that Sir Lasvius had whispered a secret plan to him to turn the situation around. He said that before opening your heart to your men however, you would first test the soldiers' resolve. Indeed. As you have three hundred patriots resolute unto death, your secret plan is sure to bear results."

"A secret plan?"

"Sir, is this true?"

Lasvius couldn't rein in his subordinates as they all spoke in unison. And he himself had no idea what this was about.

Orba continued on serenely,

"A moment ago, Sir Lasvius said that he would wait for the enemy reinforcements and move once they had started attacking Taúlia, but in practice, that would be tantamount to your soldiers dying in vain. That Garda's forces will swell means that the garrison at Helio will increase."

"W-What do you mean, 'dying in vain'?"

They looked as though cold water had been dashed on their desperate resolve and one of the captains went red in the face. Something similar could be said of Lasvius too, but in his case,

It can't be that he is...

He felt a violent trepidation. Could it be that he was planning to divulge his own plan by pretending that it had been thought up by the commander of the unit, Lasvius himself?

"It's fine, Orba. Continue."

Lasvius brought his agitated men under control. A part of him was also thinking that this was interesting. Lasvius couldn't stand Orba but mingled within him was also the thought that he was somehow different from others. And so, by way of experiment, he intended to let him speak. If what he said was ridiculous, he could always laugh and brush it aside.

Orba nodded once then,

"...At any rate, in this fight, you have to take care of things before Garda's reinforcements arrive. Attract the attention of the enemies currently within Helio towards the outside and use that chance to have the soldiers within the city rise to action."

What?

Lasvius' disappointment came from the fact that this was a plan anyone could come up with. In fact, one of his men burst out laughing.

"With our numbers, not even the most drastic measures would be enough to draw the enemy outside. And the same holds true for there being an opportunity in which they would leave Helio. Bastard, you were lying about this plan of the commander's, weren't..."

"It's not about our numbers. Because we won't be moving Garda's forces, Taúlia will."

"What?"

"If Taúlia pushes through to the front lines, given their impressive numbers, the enemy will have to consider making their own move. Will they launch a counter-offensive through the gate or will they rely on their support, close the gate and fight a defensive war? In the former

case, your soldiers within Helio will find it easy to move around, and in the latter case, if those inside light fires to provoke chaos, it will be easy for Taúlia to invade."

"Absurd. As long as Garda's forces don't move, Taúlia won't either. Cherik has struck up camp to threaten them."

"They will move," Orba asserted, "if we convey this plan to them. Without a doubt. Compared to Garda, Cherik is an insignificant force. If it becomes clear that Taúlia is serious in attacking Garda's army, then they'll be scared of being next. By remaining near Taúlia, Cherik is instead growing arrogant."

I see...

In front of his subordinates, who were agitatedly exchanging looks, Lasvius folded his arms. Orba's plan was certainly forcible, and a single miscalculation would render the chances of success extremely low. But Lasvius had from the start been preparing himself for a desperate fight.

This guy... interesting.

It wasn't a plan worked out through minute calculations and was somewhat crude, but as a military man, it set his blood coursing.

"Here," Orba placed a sheathed dagger and a letter on the damp ground, "this is a dagger proving Sir Bouwen's position and a letter in his own handwriting. We can send this to Taúlia to urge them to go to take to the battlefield."

"B-But," a cavalry captain interposed. His face showed his confusion. He was starting to wonder if it might not really be a plan from his commander, Lasvius. "The road to Taúlia is blockaded. The mountain fortress that Helio holds here in the Belgana summits which is along the way to Taúlia has been turned into a temporary checkpoint. Even if we send a messenger, it will be impossible for him to avoid getting noticed."

"It will be easy to get through the checkpoint by pretending to be an ordinary civilian. In this situation, the enemy will be more vigilant against Zerdians."

"Are you saying that you'll go?"

Realising Orba's intention, the various commanders showed disapproval. He was not a comrade tied to them with bonds of steel and they didn't trust the outsiders that were the mercenaries.

Since earlier, Orba's detached tone had remained completely unshaken.

"I'll become a hostage and stay here. The journey to Taúlia should take about three days, I think, so if there is no movement after those three days, you can do whatever you want with me."

"But,"

"Fine," the one who spoke was Lasvius. He stood up in front of the commanders who swallowed back their words. "I intend to bet on that plan. How about everyone else? You are the self-same warriors who were willing to challenge death just a while ago. If you object to this, I will think of you neither as cowards nor as traitors. Say what is on your mind."

With him having said so, it was difficult for them to show opposition. Therefore, they agreed to wait three days. Having left the council of war, Orba went ahead along the winding path.

"I can't stand you," his shoulder was clapped from behind. It was Lasvius. "Everything is going the way you want, so are you satisfied?"

"Well."

"I wouldn't be surprised to learn that there's someone famous beneath that mask of yours. But as I said earlier, this is a bet. A bet using your life as security."

"I'm used to it."

The answer and the tone of voice used were so provoking that Lasvius gave a low laugh instead. Up until now, he truly hadn't been able to stomach him, but now he felt entirely comfortable.

"Let's see how things go. A battle in which we face nothing but death has become just a little more interesting."

That's a military man for you, Lasvius' way of speaking got on Orba's nerves. That he couldn't stand him was because, be it his convictions or his pride as a soldier, he closely resembled a man who had been the embodiment of chivalry and that Orba had once faced off against at Zaim Fortress.

That man even pointed a sword at his lord's daughter for the sake of his beliefs. And this guy too, to recover Helio, he was willing to murder nomads who had nothing to do with anything. That might be a splendid attitude, but from an outsider's perspective, it's sickening.

Even though he thought so, or rather, because Lasvius was a soldier, Orba also thought to place trust in him. In short, because Lasvius himself had relaxed his ill will towards him, Orba calculated that it would be advantageous to do the same.

Chapter 6: The Strategist's Plan

Part 1

"I object."

When he learned of Orba's plan, those were the first words out of Shique's mouth, but it was clear from the start that he would follow it. He was uneasy though. You could say that he felt nothing but uneasy.

"Will Taúlia even move?"

Taúlia would be in danger if Cherik seized the chance to attack their flank. Thus he worried about whether Ax Bazgan would go along with such a risky bet.

Orba had chosen Shique, Stan and Talcott as messengers to Taúlia. None of them were Zerdians. They had decided to take the carriage used for transporting supplies and to disguise themselves as merchants.

"According to what the dragoons have been saying, the Belgana mountain fortress is currently held by a man called Ebra, one of Greygun's direct subordinates who is as greedy as his master. Because he was deployed away from Helio, he is still lamenting not having taken part in pillaging the city. Probably because he wants a taste of that nectar, he makes unreasonable demands of the people and merchants who pass by the fortress and snatches away their valuables."

"What do we do if we catch the attention of such a dangerous guy?" Talcott frankly hated his given role. "We don't have any money for under-the-table dealings. What if he flies into a rage and seizes us?"

"It's all right, Brother," Stan on the other hand had given his carefree seal of approval, "besides, wasn't it you who said that he didn't want to spend another day here? This is a chance to go back to Taúlia."

In reality, since Talcott was constantly at odds with the dragoons the only question if things remained as they were was whether he would die of starvation first or be killed by the

irritated soldiers. So, since there was no other way, he was reluctantly taking part in the plan. And it could also be said that he believed in Stan's intuition that allowed him to say that it would be "all right".

At daybreak just before leaving the cave, Shique grasped Orba, who was remaining as hostage, by the shoulders. "It will definitely return with good news. Until then, don't do anything reckless."

"I get it, geez."

"The same goes for that gentleman," Shique looked towards Gilliam, who was pretending to take a leak but who had in fact come to see them off. With his large build, he truly looked like a mercenary, so he couldn't be sent in the role of a messenger.

"If anything happens, you'd better make use of that huge body of yours to protect Orba. It's for that purpose that you received such a ridiculously large body from your parents."

"If you're not back within a week, I'll tear Orba to shreds," Gilliam bared his fang-like canines.

A few hours later.

The Belgana fortress was what was left of a fort that Zer Tauran had built to keep a tight watch across the mountains, back when the east had been dotted with violent warrior nations. It had been in Helio's possession for many decades and guarded against the powers that schemed to cross the border through the Belgana Summits.

According to the information Orba had obtained, a subordinate of Greygun's called Ebra was currently in command there. As for the soldiers, they numbered about a hundred.

Immediately after the battle at the Coldrin Hills, Ebra had personally led his men from the fortress to hunt for survivors among the defeated army, even though it wasn't part of his duties. As there had been so few enemy soldiers, the mood within the fortress was now thoroughly slack. The soldiers were conspicuous for amusing themselves by gambling, they drank from morning onwards and would occasionally pry high toll taxes out of merchants or people who were fleeing the destruction of war by heading south.

But that morning, gunshots tore apart the stagnant atmosphere. Was it an enemy attack - the soldiers on guard duty lifted themselves heavily up and climbed the watch tower.

What they saw was a covered carriage approaching in a cloud of dust. Behind it, amid an even denser cloud of dust, were men on horseback brandishing axes and guns. From the ornaments that hung from their backs to the hems of their white clothes, they recognised them

at a glance as the belligerent herders from the northern grasslands known as the Pinepey tribe.

The watchmen rang the bell and several dozen soldiers armed with rifles and spears rushed to the gate. Somewhat tardily, Ebra also came running up.

"What should we do?"

"Open the gate," Ebra's decision to let the carriage in had nothing to do with his being worried about them. If they made a poor show of impressing the Pinepey tribe then next time, they might attack the fortress. If that happened and they needed to expressly call for reinforcements from Helio, he would be on the receiving end of a harsh rebuke from Greygun.

When he saw the gate open, the driver spurred his horse even more. The gates shut as he glided through and the soldiers lying in wait above showered the Pinepey with gunfire. They were not yet at a distance where it could reach, but it seemed to have been enough of a threat as the nomads immediately turned their horses around and left.

The carriage was almost halfway across the fortress' inner grounds when it finally drew to a stop. Ebra gave the soldiers orders to inspect it and they reported that within there were only a small man and a young woman. "A woman? Does she look good?" Ebra's nostrils flared.

"No. She has a hoarse voice and no good with makeup. The man is laid flat either from illness or an injury. According to the driver, they’re foreign merchants who have fled from Helio. They don't seem to have anything of value."

As they were not Zerdian soldiers, and also with regards to the woman, Ebra completely lost interest. Still, he didn't forget to squeeze what money he could out of the merchants as a reward. Negotiating in place of his bedridden master, the driver was clearly reluctant.

"Can't you give us more of a discount?"

"Don't get cocky," the soldier thrust the tip of his spear towards him threateningly, "we saved you. You can shell out the cost of the bullets."

Several dozen minutes after the carriage had passed through the open gate at the other side of the fortress,

"Phew."

Turning to look back from inside the carriage, the woman...-ly looking Shique breathed out a sigh. He turned to Talcott who was acting as driver,

"Why didn't you hand over the money at once? We could have ended up staying there too long if they got suspicious."

"It's because I was reluctant back there that we were easily believed. By behaving exactly like merchants, the enemy soldiers didn't think to suspect us."

"True, you were pretty good. You seem at home pretending to be a merchant."

"Brother was originally from a merchant family," said Stan who was lying stretched out next to Shique and who truly looked sick. "Because he was bad at arithmetic, he ran away from home and boarded a pirate ship."

"Shut up," wiping off his cold sweat, Talcott sprung the horse into a gallop. "And of all the things for you to disguise yourself as. Since it's you, I thought you'd look better than that in women's clothing."

"Of course," Shique puffed out his chest in pride over something strange, "Someone who understands their own face can transform it with nothing but makeup."

At any rate, the first hurdle had been cleared. Greygun and Ebra didn't know that Lasvius' unit had survived, so their level of caution was low. As such, stealthily passing by the fortress in the dead of night might instead have attracted attention, whereas they had readily believed in foreigners being attacked by nomads.

Shique urged the horse onwards and they managed to arrive in Taúlia before nightfall of the second day.

Since they were messengers from Bouwen, even Ax hurried to meet them. As did Esmena.

"Is Bouwen, is Bouwen alive?" Her pallid face became flushed. Although she appeared surprised that the messenger was Shique, whom she had previously invited to the women's quarters, his own face betrayed nothing and he maintained his role as a messenger before the Bazgan father and daughter.

"Sir Bouwen was injured but as is to be expected from one who is fit and well-trained, he is recovering well. He apologises deeply for having worried and troubled his lordship and the princess, and for having lost his precious subordinates..."

"It's fine."

Ax's face also reflected strong emotions, but when he received the letter from Shique, his expression immediately returned to that of the governor-general.

After Esmena and the messengers had left, he invited Ravan Dol to his living room and, together with the strategist, went through the letter. Ax's always stern eyes grew sterner.

"Enemy reinforcements?"

"First they performed a large-scale march in order to lure the majority of their enemies into the Coldrin Hills, then they send reinforcements after Helio has fallen. That accursed Garda has not only studied sorcery, he is also rather proficient in the military arts."

"Are you praising the enemy here? However..." Ax nodded then turned his eyes once more to the letter. That this Lasvius person was lying low with three hundred subordinates on the outskirts of Helio, and that more of his men within the city had made preparations to rise up in arms was not bad information to receive. But the request that they leave Taúlia forthwith and march on Helio to perform a pincer attack was not something he could regard with any immediate favour.

Cherik's forces had taken up position within a stone's throw of the border and he couldn't leave Taúlia defenceless.

"We have three thousand left at hand. If we mobilise the elite guards, the militia and the remaining mercenaries, that gives us at best four thousand. Should we divide that in half and have them march under Raswan's command?"

"My lord," Raswan Bazgan, whom he had just been talking about had appeared. His young face was full of vigour.

"What is it? I gave orders for everyone to leave, didn't I?"

"Is it true that messengers have arrived from Bouwen? What is the state of affairs?"

"That's..."

Just as Ax was about to explain, Ravan Dol interpolated,

"The contents of the missive were vague," he said respectfully. "We will now be examining it to ascertain its authenticity."

Oh? Ax felt sceptical of Ravan’s words. The dagger that the messengers had brought to prove their identity undoubtedly belonged to Bouwen. There was no mistaking it since Ax himself had handed it to him when he had first obtained a rank of command. None other than Ravan had declared that while one could suppose that the enemy might have stolen it to serve their purposes, neither were there any difference between Bouwen's own handwriting and the one in the letter.

Raswan looked dissatisfied but as he was before the governor-general, he left without protest.

Ax gave the elderly strategist a sidelong glance.

"...What are you thinking, Ravan?"

"It would be best for now to disclose your plans to nobody. Since we hired mercenaries extensively, we must consider the possibility that spies of Garda's or Cherik's have slipped in among them. We should continue our preparations in secret then move in a single breath. "

"In a single breath. But, to do what in a single breath?"

"Move the entire army."

"The entire army?" Ax was dumbfounded. To have all four thousand soldiers leave Taúlia. "Cer-Certainly Cherik can be beaten if we suddenly move the entire army although we'll have to be sure to end it before enemy reinforcements arrive."

"No. Using all of our military might, we will seize Cherik."

"What?"

As his lord was once more left dumbfounded, Ravan casually continued,

"Even though Cherik has a connection to Garda's army, all they can do is keep us in check from a safe position after all. The mission they will have been told to perform will simply be to block Taúlia's movements. They couldn't possibly imagine that we would go directly to them."

"But..."

"With that, the castle will be empty and Garda's forces, seeing a good opportunity, will also make their move. It will be easy for Lasvius' unit to take Helio and this time, we will be able to perform a pincer movement from there. With that as our aim, we will need to force Cherik to surrender quickly. That is all."

"Using all of our military might, was it?"

"Yes."

Ax had been staring wide-eyed, but he soon started gazing fixedly at Ravan's face.

"What is it?"

"No, you just feel like an assassin sent by Garda's army. If we encounter even the smallest setback while capturing Cherik, Taúlia will fall in that time."

"It's fine, isn't it my lord," Ravan's tone of voice was exactly that of someone persuading a child, "this is our best and last chance. If we act slowly, we will be the ones driven into a

corner. If the worst were to happen as we are about to return, we can always fight Cherik with our backs to the wall. At that point, we can take position in Cherik as we aim to take back Taúlia."

"You're very bold. Have you been influenced by that youngster who bombed Apta himself?"

"Don't be ridiculous," unusually for the elder, Ravan turned his gaze aside for a moment. "At any rate, let us hope for a good opportunity and have our scouts keep a close watch on the passage between Cherik and Helio. We must grasp things at the root. First of all, we must cut them off here."

There would be no mistakes. Ax too had more than half resigned himself.

Part 2

Within the Belgana Summits came the sound of repeated gunshots. Under the eyes of the birds who were flapping their wings among the trees, the white-clad Pinepey tribe was attacking the fortress. That tribe's forte was firing from horseback.

Opposite them, from atop of the bulwark and from within the towers, those in the fort were counterattacking with guns or bows and arrows.

After the exchange of bullets had lasted a while, the Pinepey tribe began to withdraw. Inside the gate, Ebra snorted.

"Shit, day after day those irritating bastards. We're wasting bullets on this. We'll run out if we don't receive supplies from Helio."

Maybe in revenge for having hindered their attack on the carriage or maybe because they judged that the fort was worth plundering, the Pinepey had been attacking them every day without fail.

Ebra had expected that driving them away once or twice would be no problem, but this was the third day.

They had used up too many bullets in threatening the enemy on the first two days. Ebra, who hadn't thought for a moment that they were beginning a war of attrition, now reluctantly decided on hard-line tactics.

"Right. As of tomorrow, we'll have soldiers lying in ambush along the ridgeway. If the enemy attempts another raid, we'll cut off their escape route. We'll then open the gate and start in pursuit."

Their enemies didn't have stout armour. However because of that, they were nimble and on top of that they excelled at handling horses. If they chased after them in a normal way, they would not be able to catch up with them. That was why they were setting up an ambush, and Ebra was also adamant that the pursuing corps was not to wear armour.

"Once we capture one or two of them, we'll get the information about where their tribe is then attack them. There will be women too. Who knows how lucky you'll get," Ebra told his men to raise their morale.

And the next day, the Pinepey tribe attacked again. There was the usual gunfight and it seemed that they would as usual slip away when on cue, the troops waiting in ambush appeared from

the other side of the hill. The horses of the Pinepey tribe bolted upwards. Then the fortress' gates opened and more soldiers drew up from their rear.

"After them, after them, after them!"

The Zerdians who had chosen to live in cities made of stone tended to despise those of their kin who had not abandoned a life of nomadism. Ebra's conscience didn't feel a twinge at hunting down these savages and annihilating their settlement. With the Pinepey unable to move, they would easily carry off the pincer attack.

As they were descending the north side of the hill, the path was filled with a brilliant light. Staring hard, the soldiers were horrified to see fully armed and armoured riders coming up the opposite end of the slope.

"They fell for it. Go!" Roared the giant at the vanguard as shook his lion's mane of hair, and fifty riders swooped down on them.

The Pinepey group at once threw off their white clothes and drew the swords from at their waist.

"Ah!" Shouted the soldiers as the group drew near the fortress and they saw that they were not Pinepey. There was a subtle difference in skin tone between nomads and Zerdians, and the weapons they wielded were also dissimilar. The Pinepey usually used scimitars but the swords they had just pulled out had the wide blades of the broadswords commonly used within the centre of the continent.

The soldiers from the fortress fell easily to the three-stage attack . As they wore no armour, the riders with their swords and spears pierced their chests without difficulty, slashed through them and toppled them from their horses.

"Dammit, withdraw, withdraw! Wait! Don't shut the gate, I'm still..."

Frothing at the mouth, Ebra fled towards the fort just as those within, realising the crisis, were about to close the gate.

By then however, his men had all fallen dead along the mountain path and the riders were already starting to assail the gate. Ebra was caught in the charge and his spine was crushed under the horses' hooves, killing him.

A few dozen minutes later, the Belgana fortress which had been filled with the sound of screams and of swords clashing, fell silent.

"We did it," the mounted warrior who had constantly been in the van - Gilliam - called out to his companions. His mane of hair was red from his victims' blood. "You guys too. To be

honest, I've never known men fight with as much valour as you did."

The dragoons from Lasvius' unit who had played the part of the nomads also heaped praise on Gilliam's fighting style. They had once looked coldly at the Mephians but in the end, they were like-minded people fighting on the same side. The pent-up resentment at the way they had to live that Gilliam and the dragoons had accumulated had erupted during the fight. But that wasn't the reason Ebra's indolent troops had been no match for them.

Although it would have been better to attack in greater numbers, they didn't have enough horses and armour. They had bought the horses and clothes from the real Pinepey tribe in exchange for what few remaining weapons they still had.

From a separate path leading to the fortress appeared a few dozen men, Orba in their lead. They were drenched in their opponents' blood.

"Oh, the sage is back," Gilliam's thick lips curved into a smile. "Orba! How's this for a result?"

"Splendid," Orba answered from horseback.

Orba and the others had been lying in ambush along the mountain road to Helio where they had taken the task of hunting down any soldiers who tried to flee the fortress for the city.

The soldiers carried out food and weapons from inside the fortress. When the gold and valuables that Ebra had amassed were thrown out, the soldiers looked amazed, then laughed.

Orba and Gilliam stood a little apart.

"As expected after a battle."

"Hush, don't say any more. But although it's annoying to work to your plan, that went beautifully."

They hadn't attacked the fort when Shique and the others were sent as messengers because they had lacked time and preparations. Messengers had to reach Taúlia as soon as possible so Orba had reluctantly given up on assailing the fortress for the time being, and Shique's group had daringly made that dangerous crossing. However thanks to that, they had enough time to prepare for their attack. They had probed the communications network with Helio and located suitable ground for soldiers to lie in an ambush, while at the same time diverting the attention of scouts through repeated raids disguised as members of the Pinepey tribe.

Luring out the enemy required high morale and no common amount of determination. Although fleeing had been a pretence, showing your back to the enemy on a battlefield demanded courage and it would have been easy for things to degenerate into a stampede. In other words,

Lasvius' unit was best suited for that task which would once again prove their bonds of steel.

"It's not over yet. With this, we can finally guarantee communications with the south but nothing more."

"You really are an unlovable bastard. Can't you just quietly accept praise?" Gilliam said, but for Orba this was truly no more than a beginning.

Orba immediately had a messenger race to Shique who was still in Taúlia. Once they heard that the plan had succeeded, Shique, Stan and Talcott returned to the fortress which they reached before nightfall two days later. "That was tough," Shique blurted out as soon as he saw Orba's mask.

Orba wondered whether he meant the time when they passed through the fortress, but listening to him speak, it seemed that they had encountered trouble when they were leaving Taúlia.

"What happened?"

"Taúlia has temporarily closed its gates. Getting in and out is no easy thing and we got stopped once. Only the higher-ups knew that we were Sir Bouwen's messengers, you see. Somehow or another Elder Ravan invented an errand for us and we were finally allowed to pass."

"Oh? So Taúlia is finally going to make a move after all."

"Yes. But..."

At Shique's report, for an instant, Orba's eyes under the mask opened wide. The errand from Ravan that had given them permission to go out of the gate was to carry a verbal message.

"Be sure to tell General Bouwen." The message that was prefaced with that remark was:

We will not mobilise to go to Helio. However we will mobilise our entire military might.

Gilliam frowned.

"What does that mean? Shit, we don't have times for riddles."

"No," said Orba, recovering from his momentary discomposure. "I see. As expected from Ax and Ravan. They're making a bold move."

"If you're the one saying so, they really must be."

Without appearing to notice Shique's teasing, Orba turned to look towards the south.

"How will Garda's forces move after this? Will they wait for their reinforcements until the end or will they invade Taúlia?"

The timing to put the plan into operation would change depending on that. That was the point that was most crucial to a plan. No matter how fantastic the idea, it would have no effect if the timing was wrong. Conversely, with optimal timing, even a plain and humdrum stratagem could have tremendous effect.

Orba knew that well.

Soon, having received instructions from him, the soldiers at the fortress started to move. Most of them believed that this was according to their commander Lasvius' strategy and besides, they no longer felt it was so strange to follow this swordsman, who seemed like a young boy but who also had a hint of being an old fox.

At the same time.

Moldorf was riding his large horse down Helio's main road. He was a renowned general called the Red Dragon of Kadyne; there was no one to block his path. He was a man of whom it was said that when he charged forward on the battlefield with his spear, the enemy line would be smashed from a single wave of his hand.

But then from the start there hadn't been the shadow of a person along this road. Both the shops and houses that lined it on either side had their windows shut tight and the street was as still as death. No, better to say that the town itself was dead.

Garda doesn't give life to anything.

In the areas he controlled, be it politics or production, Garda did nothing to govern. He merely killed land after land.

It had been the same in Moldorf's homeland of Kadyne. He ground his teeth and spurred his horse onwards. A corpse had been left lying on the street. From somewhere, a child could be heard crying. He could feel gazes filled with hatred and despair from the windows looking down on him.

Shaking them all off, Moldorf arrived at Helio castle.

All of the generals had already gathered. He looked around at them.

Everyone is making the same face, thought Moldorf. Lakekish, Fugrum, Eimen – all were famed generals from the city-states that Garda had toppled. However irritation and resignation were painted on each countenance so that their expressions all closely resembled

each other's. Naturally, whenever he thought that this also applied to him, Moldorf felt anger hot enough to boil his entrails rise up within him.

Still, the news he heard that day left him astounded.

"What did you say? Taúlia's army is headed for Cherik?"

"There is no mistake," the one who nodded was a small man wearing a hood who was accompanying Greygun. A sorcerer directly subordinate to Garda. Moldorf had observed a number of such men and the atmosphere that surrounded them was always the same. It appeared that this time, one way or another this was the man acting as commander there in Helio where Moldorf and the others were.

"My unit has Taúlia under surveillance but there has been no such report."

If there was a person who could grasp the whole extent of the situation, they would not be able to hide their surprise any more than Moldorf could. Ravan should have been advancing with the preparations for the march on Cherik without letting any news of it leak to the outside. Even if there was, say, a traitor, the speed with which the information had been conveyed was unnatural.

But Moldorf had been incorporated into Garda's forces. With vaguely terrified feelings, he understood that Garda possessed magical powers.

"If what you say is true, then is Taúlia defenceless? If so, this is our chance to topple it."

Even as he spoke, Moldorf felt that his words were hollow. On some level, he had probably held hope. Hope that the Bazgans, the legitimate descendants of the former Zer Tauran, would hold out against Garda.

That too –

- Had been no more than a fleeting ideal. The soldiers that would be departing from Taúlia were said to number four thousand. According to those on watch, they had not employed any other soldiers, nor was there another power that would rush to them with reinforcements, so this was without a doubt Taúlia's full army.

"No," said the small man in a voice that seemed to slither, "We can obtain Taúlia at any time. It is to Cherik that we go. There we will catch Ax Bazgan in a pincer movement and take his severed head."

Part 3

In the middle of the night, Yamka II, the king of Cherik, was woken up as he was sleeping with his favourite concubine. It was with irritated feelings that he opened the door but when he heard the soldier's report, he staggered against the wall in surprise.

A large army was said to be advancing on them from Taúlia. The troop of seven hundred that were encamped at the border could only warn Taúlia's army not to cross over it then stand back without firing a single arrow or bullet.

"D-Damn you, Ax. You've gone mad."

At thirty-three, Yamka was still young. However, his hair was thinning and though his features resembled those of his sister Marilène, they were so slack that even that resemblance might change if only a single one those features were altered.

Cherik was tied to Garda. And it was as Ravan had guessed: Yamka believed that as long as he did what he had been told by holding Taúlia in check, then good luck would tumble his way even if he did nothing but sleep from then on.

For Taúlia to go so far as to risk a dangerous attack and to send soldiers to Cherik...

I-Is he angry? Has Ax decided that there's nothing to be done against Garda's army so he will at least take the h-he-head of Cherik's king? Otherwise, he would not be pouring all of his armed strength in their direction.

"Your Majesty, what do we do?"

"Please make a decision. The enemy is approaching the border fortress of Yāma. The soldiers must receive their orders, whether to fight or to retreat, so that they do not die in vain."

The ministers too were nothing but agitated and unreliable. Although Yāma was a fortress protecting the border, its defensive capacities were so poor that its barrier was covered in dust. Even though the seven hundred soldiers who had retreated were said to now all be crammed into it, if the enemy was determined to pass, they were only expected to last an hour.

"Send a messenger to Helio. With changes of airships and horses, they can quickly..."

It had already been done half an hour ago, but Ravan Dol's scouts had already set fire to the post station for the horses. And when they had run to fetch an airship, they had found that the

ether had run out.

In any case, even if the messenger returned with good news, it would take a while. Cherik's king was pressed to make a decision regarding the enemy who was drawing towards their gates.

"O-Oh to hell with it!"

Yamka II's swarthy cheeks turned red and he banged his fist upon the table. As things were, they could do nothing but offer peace negotiations to Taúlia. It was terrible to have to betray Garda and it was disappointing to lose the hard-won chance to have the name of their tiny state of Cherik resound throughout the entire region of Tauran, but they couldn't turn straw into gold.

"W-writing im-implements for a letter."

With that, it was decided that Yamka would write a letter offering peace negotiations. Deplorable, thought the ministers but even so, they could find no other solution out of this situation. Yamka's writing brush dashed along the page while his face showed nothing but anxiety.

Should I hand over the joint development rights to the Soma grain-producing region? That a tiny power such as Cherik was somehow rich was thanks to Lake Soma. It was heartrending to part with it, but if they didn't Ax might not forgive them.

His eyes grew blurry as he wrote. Wretched at having wasted the concessions over Lake Soma that his father and grandfather had long fought Helio over, he couldn't help but unconsciously shed tears. And then,

"Your Majesty!"

A soldier barged in. Yamka II almost flew up from his chair. Had Ax finally toppled the fortress, he wondered, and was he even now on the march? However,

"Troops are approaching from the direction of Helio! From the number of lights they are carrying, it's probably Garda's army!"

"What?"

His tears dried up and in their place his entire countenance light up with joy as Yamka II stood up.

"R-Reinforcements. The lord sorcerer has kept his faith and instead of proceeding directly to Taúlia has hurried to our rescue. Right, in that case, we will pull back the soldiers from

Yāma Fortress. We will draw the enemy to the outskirts of Cherik and catch them in a pincer movement along with Garda's forces."

His earlier wretchedness had vanished without a trace and now he was giving orders in a voice as bold as that of a long-serving general.

The vassals were in equally joyful spirits.

"That damn Ax is underestimating us."

"We'll show you that the light and lineage of the Bazgan House no longer hold any power in Tauran."

The stone castle was suddenly wrapped in a strange liveliness.

A few hours earlier, troops under Moldorf's command had raced out of Helio so quickly that they appeared to be flying. Their speed was such that from behind, all that could be perceived was a billowing cloud of dust. That was because,

"If Bazgan dies and Taúlia falls, this battle will be over," said the hooded staff officer who had accompanied Greygun as he looked at each of the commanders in turn with a hint of contempt. "When the battle ends, Garda-sama will release the inhabitants of each city. And of course everyone's family and friends as well."

"Is that true?"

Moldorf was going to press him further, but a strange feeling of pressure prevented him from forming his words. But there was a fierce light in his eyes as they alone glared at the man.

"Of course," the man answered matter-of-factly. "Once Taúlia has fallen and Ax Bazgan is dead, it will be tantamount to saying that all the western lands of Tauran will belong to Garda-sama. After that, the enemies will be in the east: Mephius, Ende and Garbera. For that purpose, your assistance will be needed more than ever before."

Tch. Arrant nonsense! Moldorf's face, which was normally so stern as to make him unapproachable, was now so stiff a child might go into convulsions just from looking at him.

But not matter how nonsensical it was, Moldorf had family left in Kadyne. For their release he would risk his life, no, more than his life, he would throw away his warrior's soul in this battle that had to be won.

The troops had left the outskirts of Helio and even the cloud of dust had finally cleared, when the guards on lookout from among the soldiers left in the city strained their eyes eastwards.

"Oi, look at that."

The ridgeline of the eastern Belgana Summits was bright red under the night sky. In that direction lay the fort which Ebra and a hundred men should have been occupying.

The soldiers' faces turned pale.

"No way. Is it a detached force from Taúlia?”

"Go and inform Lord Greygun!"

Currently, only Greygun's seven hundred or so troops remained in Helio. On his orders, soldiers were arrayed near the city's open east gate and people flurried in and out of it.

As they passed through the gate and entered the city, several soldiers clad in the armour and helmets of the Red Hawks raised their eyes to the scouts' airships that were flying off. At the front of that group that walked with heads down was none other than the former commander of Helio's dragoons, Lasvius himself.

According to Orba's plan, if they set fire to the fortress, the gates' surroundings would be overflowing with soldiers and it would be easy to get in and out.

A flood of emotions welled within Lasvius' breast as he passed through the gate doors wearing the Red Hawks' insignia.

"Oi," a Red Hawks mercenary called out to their group. Lasvius' face grew stiff under his helmet.

A soldier at the end of the line turned around.

"What?"

"It's about strengthening the watch on the Helio soldiers. Even if we take their families hostage, those kinds of soldiers won’t be any use if it comes to a defensive battle. There's no saying when they'll betray us."

"Got it."

"Wait. That's a pretty high and mighty way of speaking. You, what platoon are you from?"

The mercenary was openly angry. He appeared to be of some sort of platoon leader rank. At the front, Lasvius clicked his tongue. The would attract attention from all sides if they acted suspicious and got into a fight.

Should we run instead?

Helio was their birthplace. Once they entered it, they would naturally be familiar with its layout. They might be better off making a desperate for it from here and hiding themselves somewhere then...

"Who am I?" Instead of revealing the face under his helmet, the soldier who had been dealing with the mercenary since earlier on glared at him. "Did Lord Greygun especially ask you to check who I am? I don't mind. Let's both go and bother Lord Greygun about something so trivial during this emergency, why don't we?"

"Ah, n-no. Sorry. My bad."

He must have been truly afraid of Greygun. The mercenary hastily fled from the vicinity of the gate.

Lasvius quietly approached the soldier,

"You're a bold guy."

"The Red Hawks don't share a bond like your unit. By observing the leader, you can guess what an organisation's real situation is like," answered Orba. He had of course taken off his mask as he now wore a Red Hawks helmet.

With Lasvius as first on the list, five dragoons as well as Orba had been chosen to enter the urban areas of Helio.

I'm back, as Lasvius walked step by step along the flagstone road, he was shaken by that thought that welled within him. But for now, he had to hide his face and identity and stealthily make his way along.

The day will come when we make our triumphant return and openly walk along this street with our heads held high. During the hungry and miserable days in those dark caves, Lasvius had kept that one belief. Even though he had to throw away his pride as a dragoon, his chest burnt with the resolve that they must at all cost greet that day's arrival.

This night has ended. And now, "that day" that we believed in has arrived.

Lasvius' group went down the side streets and, as had already been agreed, linked up with a number of his subordinates who had already penetrated into the city. After that and under their guidance, they split up into several groups. One group which would free Helio's regular soldiers, one which would first make preparations for causing an uprising within the city, and one which would infiltrate the royal court.

Orba was part of the last group.

Chapter 7: The Chosen

Part 1

Helio's King Greygun was nervously pacing around a room in a tower overlooking the streets and castle ramparts.

Perhaps it was because the soldiers had so suddenly rushed out in columns but a crowd of people had appeared on the streets. Their faces were worn haggard from fear and exhaustion, and the clothes they wore were threadbare and stained.

Since receiving the report that flames had risen in the Belgana Summits, Greygun had armed himself and his equipment clanked as he walked.

"My dear lord, can I be of help to you?" Marilène had made her way there. She had slipped a woollen mantle over her nightclothes.

"You haven't gone to sleep?"

"How could I sleep amidst such an uproar? Is there some cause for concern?"

"It has nothing to do with you."

Greygun thrust her away. Marilène's figure beneath the thin nightclothes was so bewitching that he averted his eyes.

This woman doesn't care about anything except protecting herself, the thought flitted across his mind. Regardless of whether there was a rebellion within the country or a terrifying invader from outside it, Marilène's beauty and enigmatic charm would strangely arouse a man's lust for conquest and her safety would be guaranteed. She would surely always stand beside a conqueror.

Even if I die, you will be smiling next to the next ruler. Having forced Marilène to become his queen, oddly, Greygun was learning anger and jealousy.

He had however been irritated for a while now and it was naturally not against Marilène. Nor was it because he was alarmed about Taúlia's army. While he didn't know how many troops

Taúlia had sent their way, they certainly shouldn't be very numerous since the main force was headed to invade Cherik. It would be easy for Helio to fend them off by limiting themselves to a defensive battle. Therefore Greygun's irritation was turned neither towards Taúlia nor towards Marilène, but towards Garda's army.

Look at that filthy populace. Those are my people? This is my kingdom? He thought as one side of his mouth twisted into a distorted smile. He had always been a hard-hearted man towards others but he thought of the people of Helio as belonging to him. Because of that, he and his subordinates didn't think twice about seizing money and goods from the city, assaulting women and killing the men who defied them. Nevertheless, that was no more than gathering the fruits of their labour and once he became king, Greygun had no intention of letting that situation last for long.

But Garda said that he wants ten hostages every other day, the women and children as well as the elderly are kept shut up as hostages and every man is made to become a soldier. The country can't last like this.

Practically no trading with the outside had been carried out since Garda had gained control of the northern part of Tauran. He simply exploited the regions he had dominated through warfare. He produced nothing. He only snatched away by force what he found there and left each of the lands barren.

Before Greygun had taken the throne, Helio had been ripped apart by civil war and even within the castle, it couldn't be said that enough food remained stored. If Taúlia was to lead a military assault or if another power was to extend its grasp towards them, they might not be able to withstand a long siege. Just then,

"Commander Greygun!"

A soldier saluted from the room's entrance.

Greygun was about to thunder his usual "Call me 'Your Majesty'," but had his attention caught by the nervousness and panic in the soldier's face.

"What is it?"

"F-Fires have broken out all around the city."

Greygun didn't ask anything. Instead, his usually somewhat foppishly manicured eyebrows shot up. Not only flames but a riot had broken out in the main street. The ones leading the townspeople were probably the soldiers who had sworn loyalty to Helio's royal family. Which meant that as they freed the hostages one by one, more and more of the citizens would join the uprising.

"That damn Taúlia has stooped to working with the rats that crept in," Greygun shouted, laying bare his true nature as a mercenary commander. "Suppress them. And as an example to others, kill every citizen who joined the uprising!"

"Yes Sir!" The soldier shouted. As though she had been waiting for that, Marilène said,

"It seems that this will be a long night." Even at such a time, her smile was bewitching. "Take care of yourself. I will take my leave." Lifting the hem of her mantle, Marilène left the tower room.

Greygun viciously watched her back disappear. Even when she heard the order given to kill the people of her own country, her expression didn't change in the slightest.

Maybe she really is a witch from Cherik. Greygun had colluded with Cherik's king Yamka II to take Helio, but he now recognised from the bottom of his heart that women were terrifying creatures.

At this moment though, he did not think that the current situation required his urgent attention. His expression changed however as reports came in one after another.

"Your Majesty"

"Commander!"

Riots had broken out not only in the main street but throughout the city. He ordered soldiers to be sent to suppress the situation from the second report.

"Damn it!" Greygun roared like a wild beast. "Those bastards deliberately staggered the uprisings," he realised that their aim was to scatter the soldiers. "Shut the castle gate tight! Concentrate the soldiers in front of it. Right, gather only the soldiers from my unit and have them strengthen the defence."

"But Commander, that's..." He started to say that would mean not moving at a time when Taúlia's army was advancing towards them but,

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me 'Commander'!" Greygun angrily interrupted him. He too realised it all too well. "If Garda's army and Cherik catch Taúlia's main forces in a pincer attack, reinforcements will soon arrive. Hurry up and do as I say."

After the cowering soldier had left practically fleeing, Greygun breathed noisily, his shoulders heaving.

"This is my kingdom," he muttered as if to convince himself in that empty room. "I obtained it, it's my kingdom. I won't hand them over to anybody. Not the people, not the treasures, not

Marilène..."

From outside the window, he heard the roar of the crowd's angry voice. Were they frightened or did they raise their voice in encouragement at taking Helio back, or was it that they were already tussling with the soldiers? The city that had been as quiet as a tomb ever since it fell to Garda's army was once again filled with a wild energy from fighting and killing whose heat seemed fan the flames that were rising up.

"Commander."

Another soldier had rushed in. Clicking his tongue, Greygun shifted nothing but his gaze towards him. "What is it this time? It doesn't matter if another riot broke out. Strengthen the defence here and..."

"No," the soldier wore his helmet low over his eyes as he answered courteously. In his hand, he carried a short spear. "I'm paying you this visit to take your life, Commander."

"What!"

Before the echo of Greygun's shout had time to die out, pale sparks scattered before his eyes. He had hastily unsheathed his sword to parry the spear that the soldier had thrust forward.

"B-Bastard," Greygun glared at his opponent as, to the sound of metal-on-metal, he used his strength to push back. "Who are you? You stole that Red Hawks armour, didn't you?"

"You don't know my face?"

Greygun's physical strength was far from being average but his opponent's didn't fall short either. Their faces came close together.

"A cur who doesn't know my face isn't fit to be Helio's king. It was fated that things would end up like this. I'll take Helio's throne back from you so carve the name of the man who is about to kill you into your memory. I'm the commander of Helio's dragoons, Lasvius!"

"Lasvius. So you were still alive, you bastard?"

Greygun pushed at his blade with all his might then suddenly kicked Lasvius in the knee. As his opponent's stance collapsed, he brought his sword down to his neck but was repelled by a swift movement from the spear. During that time, Orba and the others, still dressed in the Red Hawks' equipment, were securing the entrance to the tower. In that way, they would able to get the better of any other soldiers who came along.

"His Majesty has stated that no one is to go through. On his orders, you're to go and help strengthen the castle's defence."

"B-But," a broken arrow was piercing the shoulder of a soldier who sought an audience to give his report, "the people have begun to surround the castle!"

"Of course, since it's a siege war. Stall for time. Don't do anything rash, got it? If you provoke them, they might even attack with fire."

Each time, the soldiers who came up to them were turned away.

"Ah!" A platoon leader who had been arguing with Orba in front of the gate let out a strange cry when he saw his face. He had held suspicions and had gone to check. "You again. Let me pass. I'll take the blame so you've no reason to mind, right?"

He was planning to break through forcibly. Orba thought that if it came to a fight, he could always brandish the spear he was carrying under his arm and use the pole end to hit the platoon leader hard across the head to knock him out.

"I do mind. I've been told not to let anyone through."

"Th-That man..."

"He isn't a Red Hawk. The commander is in danger. Get them!"

As the mercenaries surged towards the centre, Orba's group threw their spears. Their pursuants steps faltered, allowing them to race into the tower. Each drew the sword at his waist and, choosing the narrowest opssible parts of the staircase, they ambushed their enemies from above. The sound of sword striking sword rang out on either side of the enclosed space.

On the floor above, Greygun and Lasvius were locked in fierce combat. When Lasvius attacked with his spear and brought it down, Greygun pushed him back with a stroke of his blade. The clash of steel rang out once more and the sparks glowed red then burned blue.

The struggle for supremacy continued. At first glance, Lasvius with his long-handled spear had the advantage but because the room was not so very wide, it caused a lag in his switching from attack to defence. At which point Greygun attacked with enough energy to slice through wind.

Both of their armours were damaged and dented, and they were covered in superficial wounds. Both were breathing raggedly. Lasvius had thought that he would be able to settle the likes of Greygun with a single jab of his spear but he had to recognise that he had underestimated him.

Petty tricks won't cut it.

The tip of his spearhead swooshed forward, tearing the wall hangings. Narrowly avoiding it, Greygun deflected the spear and returned a blow in the same breath. Seeing a chance to win, Lasvius boldly stepped forward. He sacrificed his armoured left arm to catch the sword and in one short stroke gave a jab with his spear.

"Argh!"

"Ugh!"

Both cried out in pain and staggered back. The bone in Lasvius' left arm had broken while the spearhead had penetrated Greygun's right eye. As Lasvius suddenly, forcefully yanked back his right arm, the tip of the spear pulled with it a white lump that was trailings threads of blood.

"B-Bastard."

Each felt an implacable resentment towards the other.

Greygun was a man whose life had been even more contemptible than his birth. And so, as though pursuing a mirage, he had sought to obtain a kingdom that would be his alone. Even if he died and became a ghost, he would probably keep clinging to it.

Lasvius on the other hand was a man who had endured in the name of upholding righteousness.

Greygun wordlessly swung his sword. His spear under his arm, Lasvius charged bodily at his enemy with all his strength.

Fresh blood splattered across the wall.

Of the two bodies that fell in a heap, one slumped to his knees then fell backwards, after which it didn't move a single eyelash.

Part 2

From the parlour of the women's quarters, even if Marilène hadn't been gazing towards the outside she would still have seen it. Several areas within the city were wrapped in the colour of flames but as they had been lit for the calculated purpose of luring Greygun's soldiers away, it was unlikely that there would be too much damage. "Your Majesty," from the shadow of a pillar, a lady's maid had turned around. A group of several people had formed and they were looking enquiringly at the queen, their faces pale. Marilène smiled as ever.

"Please go," she said. "The frenzied soldiers might harm you too. Wait until the excitement dies down. Do not come near here for the time being, is that clear?"

"But..."

"Even if I flee, I will stand out wherever I am. Come now, we don't have time to discuss it. This is the last order you will receive from me. Go."

In a corner of the women's quarters, there was a secret passage that led out from the castle. Instead of using it herself, the queen gave priority to having her attendant ladies' maids leave.

They could already hear the rough voices of soldiers.

"Capture Marilène!"

"We'll hang that woman who sold her country time and time again."

Even upon hearing such horrifying shouts, Marilène's expression didn't change. She looked exactly as though she were about to face the new day as she did every morning, leisurely passing her time with a cup of the black tea she loved in her hand.

The strength of the released soldiers and people of Helio far exceeded the unity of the Red Hawks mercenaries. The few dozens who had first lit the fires and raised the riots had almost all been killed by the mercenaries who had quickly been dispatched to suppress them. After that however, the mostly uninjured mercenaries protecting the castle's surroundings had faltered.

His Highness Prince Rogier Helio is alive.

When the Helian soldiers who had invaded the city spread that information, it was as though they had tossed firewood onto the fire smouldering within the people. If Helio's royal family

was restored, then they could once more return to the peaceful days they had known before. And if in order for that to happen some things had to be removed, they were prepared to do so with all their might and at the risk of their own lives.

Before long, the figure of a person appeared at the top of a tower within the castle.

The crowd murmured.

When that figure raised high the spear he held in his right hand, it marked the end of the long night as the light of dawn dimly appeared.

Lasvius.

Pierced at the tip of the spear held up by Helio's commander of the dragoons was Greygun's head.

In an instant, the road was filled with noise and cheers after which the mercenaries, who had lost their will to fight and who were scrambling to be the first to escape, were chased down and pelted with stones, those who lost their balance were straddled and beaten - it was a murderous one-sided retribution. The crowd's joy swelled but far from being appeased, the fire that smouldered within them burned even fiercer.

"Drag out that treacherous queen!"

"We'll cut her head off right here!"

Looking for a fresh victim, the crowd led the way into the women's quarters.

Meanwhile, Orba had descended the tower and was about to exit its hall. It went without saying that he had removed the Red Hawks helmet and replaced it with his usual mask. Those found by that seething, murderous crowd would probably be tortured to death without being able to utter a single excuse.

He had no choice but to ignore the populace's actions. He still had things he needed to do. Naturally Garda's forces were not in Taúlia and he had heard that they had gone to Cherik. Therefore, they had to organise the released soldiers as well as the main body of Lasvius' unit that would soon be arriving into reinforcements for Taùlia.

Garda's army moved exactly as though they had predicted all of Taúlia's movements. He shelved that mystery for now. As he was leaving the hall,

"You there," a deep voice hailed him. When he turned to look, Hardross Helio stood before him.

There was a soldier accompanying him on either side. Bodyguards directly attached to the royal family, no doubt. Lasvius' men must have secretly informed Hardross about the time of the uprising as they were fully armed and had their visors down.

"I came across you before in the audience hall. I thought you looked strange but you were one of Lasvius' subordinates disguised as a mercenary?"

"..."

Hardross had apparently mistaken Orba for one of the spies Lasvius had sent to Helio. As explaining things over would be bothersome, Orba just lowered his head and muttered "Yes".

"The plan for a series of fights was splendid. Is Rogier safe?"

"He is in good health."

"I see." The old man closed his eyes as though overcome by a flood of emotions but the next moment said something surprising:

"The merit for that goes to the queen."

"To... Lady Marilène?"

"It was Marilène who allowed that child to escape," the old man spoke in a subdued voice. When King Elargon had been slain in battle and Helio was in the midst of a civil war, Jallah had discovered Rogier hiding with his mother in an underground storehouse. Jallah was on the side of the rebellion but it was not in his character to take the initiative in the fighting. He had been half coerced by his comrades and, as a result of weighting his personal safety against his loyalty to Helio's royal family, he had joined them with his feet dragging.

And so, Marilène had approached Jallah. Earnestly begging him for protection, she had indirectly shared her wisdom with him.

"She is a clever woman," Hardross, the former king, smiled. "She probably used Jallah to inveigle herself near each of the rebels and lure them into destroying themselves over the crown."

It was Marilène who had allowed Rogier to escape. She had asked her ladies' maids to entrust him into the care of Lasvius, who still resisted and fought the rebels within the city.

"Afterwards, Jallah reaped the benefits of a war he didn't fight. Marilène planned to revive Helio by becoming his queen since he was easy to control."

Why was it that at a time like this, Hardross told the truth about the queen to someone like

Orba? Orba couldn't understand it. Maybe anyone would have done. The old man had too much locked up inside him.

"My lord," Orba suddenly spoke after having listened in silence to the end of the story. He had been considering Marilène's situation.

"What?"

"Then Lady Marilène was protecting the country?"

"That is right."

"And she became Greygun's queen because having someone near him to temper his tyranny would prevent the people from suffering even more."

"Yes. Yes, that is also correct," the old man's voice had gradually become tinged with sadness. "We feigned to hate each other in order to encourage the rumour that the last direct member of the Helio royal bloodline still had considerable influence. Even when she wished me good health, it appeared like the wicked Marilène was being insincere. So that the people would welcome Rogier when he someday returned as a legitimate heir to Helio."

There probably hadn't been any time for Hardross and Marilène to agree to cooperate. Both had silently decided to stage their play. Because of that, Hardross had spent his days feeling vexed. It wasn't Marilène, Jallah or Greygun that he hated. What he hated was his own powerlessness which left him unable to protect the country except by pushing his son's wife into becoming a criminal.

"With the threat from the west drawing ever closer, she thought that we couldn't afford any more internal divisions and so set Jallah up as king. She thought that we couldn't give Garda's army the power to make every decision concerning Helio and so she made Greygun king. She is a clever woman. Too clever. If she had just been a little more foolish, if she had merely been beautiful, she would have been remembered as a queen who had tragically been toyed with by those in power."

The rumour that she had allied herself with Cherik to take over the country was untrue. Marilène had probably had doubts when Jallah happily hired Greygun, but suspecting that her older brother Yamka II was tied to Garda was surely something that she would never have imagined.

Outside, the noise was at its height. The soldiers and populace were headed towards the women's quarters. Watching the situation from the corner of his eye, Orba felt an urgent sense of restlessness.

"The queen is..."

"I know," Hardross interrupted him, "she will have predicted this. That once Rogier returned to Helio she would be executed as the queen who had betrayed her country. In that way, she will have protected the power of Helio's royal family. Such is the woman she is."

Ridiculous. The muscles in Orba's arms and shoulders stiffened as he tightly clenched his fists without realising he was doing it. Why would she go so far to protect Helio, to protect the royal family? Although she had worried for the country more than anyone else, she would be executed by the people and would forevermore be remembered in infamy.

Words came floating up from the depths of Orba's memories.

We were –

Born into royalty. It is our duty to devote ourselves to the country's affairs.

In Seirin Valley, that girl, Garbera's third princess Vileena Owell, had spoken those words to Orba who was pretending to be Gil Mephius.

It is our duty to quell personal joy or personal will. It's only to be expected from people who are praised for their noble blood.

At that time, Orba had heard it only as the self-aggrandising of a person in power. Nothing but a way to justify the special privileges and luxurious existence of those who freely manipulated the lives and fates of the people.

And yet – there was one who was about to accomplish that duty. Even as she was being spat on by the people, even as the nobles reviled her as a temptress who sold out her own country, even as the soldiers drove her to the scaffold with their spears, Marilène would proudly embrace death.

And she would do so with her eyes wide open and a smile on her lips.

Why was it that for Orba, that image overlapped with that of a girl whose platinum hair flowed down her back? He was sure that had she have been in the same situation, that girl would have chosen that same path.

Orba remained standing as though at a complete loss. Staring at his own shadow as it stretched out from between the gap in the door, dyed in the colours of the morning light.

Part 3

When Marilène's figure appeared in the street, the crowd suddenly went wild.

The smiles that stretched across their faces were the exact opposite of normal smiles as they were filled with hatred. Soldiers armed with spears stood on either side of Marilène and as was made to walk with a rope tied around her hands. The soldiers had done that of their own volition, spurred on by the crowd. Although the queen's native country of Cherik had reached out to Garda, the king had not officially declared that the alliance was broken as there no longer was a king.

But nobody stopped it. There were some people there with discernment but they judged that before the people went out to meet the new king, they should discharge all the pus that had stagnated within them.

Yes, this is fine, Marilène inwardly acquiesced.

The pain and anguish from King Elargon's death had given rise to anger and hatred. The royal family was supposed to protect the people. When they failed to achieve that, they fell. According to the natural way of things, Helio's royal family should have disappeared from the pages of history.

Marilène however had deliberately gone against that. Since she had married into it from another country, she believed that she had to defend Helio's royal family. She believed it was fine if the brunt of the soldiers' feelings, they who protected the people and the royalty, was turned against her.

Something came flying and hit Marilène's head.

It smelled nasty. Rotten fruit. After one person had hurled it, a large number of others followed suit. Marilène had always been conscious of appearances and liked to dress up. Her expensive clothes became filthy and a foul stench rose from her beautifully arranged hair.

"Stop it!" She cried as her hair grew dishevelled. "What did I do? Spare me. I'll give you anything, just spare my life!"

It was unsightly, how she pleaded for her life.

The people laughed, jeering at her. The soldiers had a hard time holding them back as they seemed about to leap forward at any moment. The stones and fruit that were thrown bounced off the soldiers' armour and the soldiers' faces showed their concern. Fanned by mass

hysteria, the crowds' feelings showed no signs of abating. The battle with Garda's army in which their family members were killed, the loss of their lovers, the pillaging of their homes under Greygun's oppression, they were convinced that all of it was Marilène's doing. Realising that even they were about to be swallowed up by it, the soldiers lost their composure.

"Move, move!"

The surging crowd parted in two from the back. Upon looking to see, they saw the garb of the mounted Royal Guards who rode on horseback fully armed, wearing a sleeveless blue outergarment over their armour. The Guards in this case consisted of a singlehorseman who scattered the people left and right with his spear as he drew up.

"I have a message from Lord Hardross," the guardsman spoke loudly. He had his visor down so that the area below his eyes and nose could barely be seen. "He says that he will be responsible for the punishment meted out to Marilène, the witch who tricked Helio into falling into chaos. Get up."

When the authority of Helio's royal family was put forward, the people seemed to be in a mood to accept it and the huge wave of murderous intent receded somewhat. However it was in the expectation that the royal family would have Marilène's head cut off.

In and of itself, Marilène's fate had not changed.

And soon enough,

"Doing it here will do well enough," said the royal guardsman and he got Marilène to kneel in the middle of intersecting streets. "I will now proceed with the execution of the treacherous Queen Marilène."

Marilène heard the guardsman's voice as though it were coming from very far away. In reality, it was her own heart which was in place far from there. Was it already twelve years ago? When Helio and Cherik fought over the rights to Lake Soma. As proof that the two countries were sheathing their blades and joining in a peace agreement, Cherik's Princess Marilène was going to marry into Helio. She was fourteen years old at the time.

As the carriage jolted its way along the road, Marilène had been filled with unease. The princess was by nature shy and deeply devout, and often secluded herself in the Dragon Gods temple. Would it really be possible to get along well with Helio, which had been an enemy country? What would marriage to a man whose face she had never even seen be like...

The carriage came to a hill which commanded an unbroken view of Lake Soma to its left. That day, it had been cloudy all morning but the clouds had suddenly parted and light had shone through.

Even now, Marilène had not forgotten the sight of the light scattered over the surface of the lake.

"Whoa," the coachman had raised his voice in surprise. The attendants and escorting guards had been equally taken aback.

Accompanied by only a handful of attendants, Hardross Helio was coming towards them from the opposite slope. Marilène's father, who had gone in order to attend the wedding ceremony and who had been jolting along in a different carriage, had gone out to meet him.

"Well now, King Hardross. I certainly didn't expect you to come this far out."

"Ah well, my impatience got the better of me. May I meet the bride?"

Marilène had been brought out of the carriage to meet the person who would become her father-in-law for the first time on that hill. Almost dizzy from nervousness, she had been prompted to make her greetings. King Hardross had simply smiled with his eyes.

"Ah, what a lovely princess. I would like to welcome the princess on behalf of the people of Helio." He had been in high spirits and had added,

"That's right, your marriage to my son Elargon will mean peace for the area around Lake Soma. Then when you bear a child, let us call it Soma as a prayer for eternal peace between our two countries."

He had spoken a little too hastily and the bride's face had turned bright red.

I, even though she had sunk to her knees on the cold paving stones, something like a faint smile appeared on Marilène's lips, *I knew nothing of my bridegroom's face or his voice or his character. But still, when back then I saw King Hardross look so happy, I thought that I would surely be able to love that father's child. I thought that I too would surely be able to love the country that that king loved.*

A sword glittered at the nape of her neck. Marilène held her breath and stole a glance at the rows of faces watching intently.

My beloved people.

My beloved King Elargon.

The guardsman lifted his sword overhead in a rush of air. Marilène closed her eyes.

My beloved... Helio.

May you prosper forever along with father-in-law, along with Helio's royal family...

Then,

Just as she felt the back of her neck grow cold, something fell with a thud on to the street.

The raised sword itself.

There was not a single drop of blood. Clasped in the guardsman's hand was something that could have been mistaken for fine cloth as it glittered in the early morning light. Marilène's hair. He had cut it off with a single stroke of his sword.

"With this, the wicked Marilène's relationship with Helio's royal family is utterly severed," the guard announced. "From here on, she may go to Cherik or to Garda's side or wherever she pleases to live out the remainder of her wretched life - so says Lord Hardross."

"That's..."

Marilène looked up in amazement while the people started an uproar that seemed to give voice to their innermost feelings.

"His lordship is too lenient!"

"Is he going to pretend not to see our anguish?"

"Please cut off her head!"

When they saw the colour of madness once more creep into the people's eyes, the soldiers escorting Marilène reflexively stood with their spears at the ready.

"Indeed, Queen Marilène has died."

A booming voice reverberated over the people's heads. The guardsman raised his hand and Marilène's lustrous hair fell from his open palm and was carried away by the wind.

"As she is no longer queen and has lost the pride and the ability to call herself royalty, she will henceforth live a miserable life. There is no one in all of Tauran who does not already know of her crimes. She will live while being cursed and reviled. There can be no worse punishment for Marilène. For the people of Helio who endured without losing our pride even when we were crushed under heel by a vile tyrant, a woman such as this is less than a speck of dust in the pages of our history. Jallah and Greygun are both dead! Twice have we shown all of Tauran that Helio's justice will slam down the hammer of judgement when it needs to. Helio needs no further deaths, no further bloodshed."

He continued to cry out exactly as though it were Hardross himself speaking. The people felt an indescribable sense of desolation and of the changing of the times and, as Marilène's hair

drifted away into a sky bathed in the morning's glow, they remained silent.

"From here on, all of our military units will be sent the sweep our true enemy, Garda's army. We will win and return in triumph. I want you to pave the way for that. I want you to prepare liquor to quench the soldiers thirst and to arrange food to satisfy their hunger. And I want you to prepare songs and dances to give thanks for victory, I want us to rejoice together. People of Helio, at this time, that is by far more important. The likes of Marilène is not worth putting to the sword!"

When the man from the royal guards finished his speech, a shout of joy rose from all around him and, as though carried on a wave, was transmitted throughout Helio. Upon hearing that joyful clamour, even a person on the outside who was ignorant of the situation within would understand at once that Helio had been liberated and would raise their fist in glee.

Once the guardsman had made sure of what was happening, he ducked down on to one knee and peered into Marilène's face.

Why?

Disregarding the question in her eyes, he whispered in a voice that only Marilène could hear,

"You will find a carriage prepared for you before the gates. With it are several ladies' maids who requested to go with you. Cherik will be unsafe for a while so it would be best for you to conceal your lineage and hide in one of the surrounding villages for now. You will also have funds to take with you."

"You are...," Marilène was startled to see the eyes peeping out from behind the visor. Without breaking eye contact, the guardsman took a dagger out from his breast and cut the ropes around her hands with it.

"Now, be gone," he bid her in a loud, harsh tone.

The former queen gazed at that nearby face for a moment then something like a smile appeared on her lips.

"As I thought, you are a man with interesting eyes."

Rising unsteadily to her feet, she started to walk towards the gate. There were no more than a few dozen metres. But for Marilène, it was an enormously long distance. The people hurled invectives at her while parting to make way. One small child, probably to show his courage, trotted towards her and kicked her foot. With no more than that, the former queen faltered and almost stumbled, causing a torrent of laughter.

Only Orba, disguised as a Royal Guard and still on one knee, bowed his head in the direction

of Marilène's back in the posture of a vassal seeing her off.

Those in power had robbed Orba of all he possessed and he therefore hated all those in power. Right now however, he praised her name from the bottom of his heart.

You are a very great queen, Queen Marilène.

Even if her clothes were filthy, even if stones were thrown at her, as she shouldered her duty as one of the elect, she appeared so radiant as to be dazzling to Orba's eyes.

Marilène's honour, which had sunk to the ground, would one day be restored. The day would come when Hardross would reveal the truth. But when would that day be? How many years would it take before Hardross' tale became the truth and Marilène was universally praised? However it was, the former queen would surely once more pass through Helio's gates.

It had been a few minutes since Marilène's figure had disappeared from sight and Orba had stood up again when,

"Ah, it's Lord Lasvius!"

"Lord Lasvius"

Lasvius rode up to cheers from the crowd. He jumped off his horse and spoke to Orba.

"How did it go?"

Orba gave a nod.

"It all went according to Lord Hardross' wishes."

"Oh, is that so? Yet I heard that rather than his lordship, the idea came from you." Lasvius gave a faint smile as he surveyed Orba, dressed up as a Royal Guard. "That appearance suits you," he said. "My men have gathered together Helio's soldiers. We don't have time to fine tune a reorganisation but - are you going too?"

"Yeah," Orba nodded once more as if to say that it was obvious. He then looked at Lasvius. "Your arm seems out of commission but will you be all right?"

"You talk like an aristocrat," Lasvius grinned and showed his left arm which was held fixed by a splint. "I'd beat up any subordinate who asked me that. It's not a question of being all right or not. As long as I'm on a dragon or a horse I'll be able to send enemy heads flying in the air."

The sun was now so high that the outline of the castle ramparts blazed white.

"While we're at it, your face doesn't seem particularly infected."

"Oh, I'm a spy for Garda."

While they exchanged banter, Orba's heart was flying towards the battlefield.

What should I do?

Since achieving revenge against Oubary, he still didn't know the answer to that. But at least he could now see what his next step should be.

I'll bring Garda down.

Killing a single sorcerer might not be enough to halt the disturbances throughout the Tauran region. Indeed, once the common enemy was removed, it would probably return to its previous state of inter-city strife. And the ones who would suffer and lament would be the people.

Tauran has no king.

A king...

Orba's eyes shone in the morning light and seemed to glitter white.

Afterword

This marked the start of the second part of "Rakuin no Monshou".

The stage is the western region of Tauran.

As the (body double of the) prince, Orba previously played an active role, sometimes leading an army of several hundred, sometimes ambushing enemies whose numbers were twice that of his own forces. This time however, he is just a single mercenary.

Tauran is rougher and more savage than the centre of the continent, and there he is destined to fight a mysterious sorcerer who claims to be Garda, but... Yep, that is the outcome we are headed towards.

Now then.

As the author, I felt quite uneasy for a number of reasons when I started this second part. The first cause for concern was of course that the stage had moved from Mephius to Tauran. Mephius has been the setting for four books and I was silently worried about leaving that familiar land in which so many of the characters are rooted.

But...

Right, starting with Taúlia and then Helio and Cherik, describing the cities, people and customs of the western regions was really, really fun. The sky and wind are free there, unlike in Mephius, where the atmosphere is oppressive because of Emperor Guhl's wilfulness and of his constant attempts to checkmate the relations between the three countries.

Of course, Tauran is a land of incessant warfare and the current invasion by Garda's army has left the people terrified. Even so – because it is a land that has long experienced war – warriors would feel more at home there than in Mephius or Garbera. It was fun to write about since although each of the individual western countries are only small powers, their statesmen have a wide range of personalities.

So.

Because I was engrossed in depicting all of this (although that isn't the only reason) the all-important Mephius didn't appear. Which also means that Princess Vileena, the heroine who up until now had a perfect attendance record of appearing on the covers next to Orba, didn't get

her turn either this time.

However, no matter how wide the world becomes, "Rakuin no Monshou" is first and last Orba's tale and it goes without saying that Vileena's existence is indispensable to that tale. We will just have to wait a while for the two to meet again.

-- Tomonori Sugihara